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JOHNNY LUDLOW

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"EAST LYNNE"

600060701K



JOHNNY LUDLOW.

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PREFACE.

SOME speculation has existed as to who is the writer of the Papers purporting to be by Johnny Ludlow, and more than one individual has come forward claiming to be the Author. In answer to this, and to divers suppositions, I think the time has come for me to state that they are written by myself. When I began the stories—for the *Argosy* Magazine—my only motive for not putting my name to them was that they appeared to be told by a boy; and to append my name as the Author would have destroyed the illusion; or, at least, have clashed with it. Many of my friends, the publishers, printers, etc., have known from the first who wrote "Johnny Ludlow."

And now, having said thus much, it only remains for me to thank the public, as I do sincerely and heartily, for the very great favour they have accorded to these simple and unpretending stories.

ELLEN WOOD.

LONDON, *September*, 1880.

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JOHNNY LUDLOW.

I.

LOST IN THE POST.

MANY a true tale has been told of the disappearance of money in passing through the post. Sometimes the loss is never cleared up, but remains a mystery to the end. One of these losses happened to us, and the circumstances were so curious that they would have puzzled a bench of Judges. It was a regular mystery, and could not be accounted for in any way.

If you chanced to read the first series of these papers, it may scarcely be necessary to recall certain points to your recollection—that Mr. Todhetley, commonly called the Squire, had two estates. The chief one, Dyke Manor, lay on the borders of Worcestershire and Warwickshire, partly in both counties; the other, Crabb Cot, was a smaller place altogether, and lay much nearer Worcester. Sometimes we stayed at one

place, sometimes at the other. By an arrangement with Mr. Brandon, my guardian and the trustee to my property, I, Johnny Ludlow, lived with the Todhetleys. Mrs. Todhetley, the Squire's present wife, was my stepmother, my father having married her after my own mother's death. After my father's death—which took place speedily—she became the second wife of Squire Todhetley, and the stepmother of his only son and heir, Joseph. Two children were subsequently born, Hugh and Lena, to whom Joseph was of course the half-brother. Joseph, unlike myself, had been old enough to resent the advent of a stepmother when she came: indulged and haughty, he did not like the gentle control she brought; though she was good as gold, as loving to him as he would let her be, and kind to everybody. I don't say but that she was tall and thin as a lamp-post, with a mild face, given to have aches in it, scanty light hair, and kindly blue eyes; so she had not much to boast of in the way of appearance. Joe and I grew up together like brothers: he was several years the elder, and domineered over me absolutely. At school he was always called "Tod;" and I fell into the same habit. Perhaps that is enough of explanation.

"And if you don't come back to-night, you had better send me a five-pound note in a *letter,*" *said* Mrs. Todhetley.

"All right," replied the Squire.

This was said on the platform of Timberdale station. We were staying at Crabb Cot, and were taking the train at Timberdale instead of that at South Crabb. The Squire was going to Worcester, and was taking Tod and myself with him. It was a fine morning in April, and Mrs. Todhetley and little Hugh had come with us through the Ravine for the sake of the walk. Our returning at night, or not, was left an open question, contingent upon the Squire's business at Worcester being over.

"Bring me a whip, and a new bird-cage for my thrush, and a pot of marmalade, papa," called out Hugh.

"What else would you like, sir?" retorted the Squire.

"You bring 'em, Joe."

"I dare say!" said Tod.

The train puffed off, drowning Hugh's further commands. We saw him throw his cap at the train, and Mrs. Todhetley holding him back from running after it.

"That young gentleman wants to be sent to school," remarked the Squire. "I'm afraid you two boys make him worse than he would be."

We reached Worcester about twelve, and went to the Star and Garter. The Squire had no end of matters on hand that day: but the two chief things that had brought him to Worcester *were—to draw some* money at the bank,

and to negotiate with Mr. Prothero, a corn-dealer, for the sale of a load of wheat. Mr. Prothero was a close man to deal with: he wanted the wheat at one price, the Squire said it should only go at another: if he held out, the Squire meant to hold out, even though it involved the staying of the night at Worcester.

It was Wednesday; market-day. Not so large a market as the Saturday's is, but the town looked pretty full. The first thing the Squire did was to go to the Old Bank. At the door he turned round and said there was no need for three of us to crowd into the place. However, we were then inside, and so went on with him.

He had something particular to say to Mr. Isaac, and asked for him. They were talking together in private for a minute or two, and then the Squire pulled out his cheque for fifty pounds, and laid it on the counter.

"How will you take it?" asked Mr. Isaac.

"In five-pound notes."

Mr. Isaac brought the money himself. The Squire put it in his pocket-book, and we said good-morning, and departed. There were shops to call at and people to see: and of course the market to walk through. You'd not get the Squire to keep himself out of the market-house, when in Worcester on market-day: he'd go asking the price of the butter and fowls like any *old woman.* A little after four o'clock we got

back to the Star; and found Mr. Prothero had not made his appearance.

"Just like him!" cried the Squire. "His appointment was for four o'clock sharp. He means to hold out against my price; that's what he thinks to do. Let him! he'll not get the wheat at less."

"I'd see him a jolly long way before he should have it at all," said haughty Tod. "Do you hear, sir?"

"Hold your tongue, Joe," was the Squire's answer.

"Anyway, sir, Prothero gives you more trouble than all the rest of the buyers put together. He's a stingy, close-fisted fellow."

"But his money's safe and sure. Prothero is a respectable man, Joe; his word's as good as his bond."

Half-past four, and no Prothero. The Squire began to fume a little: if he hated one thing more than another, it was to be kept waiting.

"Look here, boys, I'll send that note to your mother," he said, taking out his pocket-book. "There's not much chance of our going home to-night at this rate. Ring, one of you, for some paper and envelopes."

Separating one of the notes from the roll Mr. Isaac had given him, he gave it to me to put up. I asked him if I should take down the number.

"I don't think it matters, Johnny.'

But I took it down, perhaps through some unconscious instinct—for I don't suppose I am more cautious than other people. In my pocket was a letter from Anna Whitney: and I pencilled on it the number of the note.

"Write inside the envelope 'Not home till to-morrow,'" growled the Squire, forgetting that it could not be there till the morning. But he was in an ill-humour.

I wrote it at his bidding, enclosed the bank-note, and addressed the letter to Mrs. Todhetley at Crabb Cot. Tod and I went out to post it, and began laying plans of how we should spend the evening at Worcester.

The post-office is not far from the Star, as everybody knows: and though we met a fellow who used to go to school with us, a doctor's son, and stayed talking with him, not ten minutes elapsed before we were back again. And behold in that short while there was a change in the programme. Old Prothero had been in, the bargain about the wheat was concluded, and the Squire intended to start for home as soon as dinner was over. Tod resented the change.

"Johnny and I were going to that advertised *séance*—or whatever they call the thing—on electro-biology, sir. It will be first-rate fun, they say."

"*Very sorry* for you and Johnny. You'll

have to go home instead. Prothero has bought the wheat: and that's all I should have had to stay here for."

"At his own price!" cried Tod, rather mockingly.

"No, Mr. Joe; at mine."

"Well, it's an awful sell for us," grumbled Tod. "It's not so often we get a night at Worcester, that we should be done out of this chance."

"The fact is, I don't feel well," said the Squire, "and should most likely have gone home, whether Prothero had come in or not. I'm afraid I have caught cold, Joe."

There was not any more to be said. The Squire's colds were no joke: once he caught one, he'd be downright ill; laid up for days. We went back by rail to Timberdale, and took a fly home.

The next morning the Squire did not get up. Sure enough he had a cold, and was feverish. At breakfast Mrs. Todhetley said one of us should go over to South Crabb and ask Mr. Cole to call and see him.

"Why, the Pater hates doctors!" exclaimed Tod.

"I know he does," she answered. "But I feel sure that if he would only take remedies for his colds in time, they would not be so bad as they usually are, Joseph. Who's that?" she added—for she was seated where she could not see out, and had heard the gate click.

It was the postman: so I opened the glass doors.

"Only one, sir," said he, handing me the letter we had posted at Worcester the previous afternoon.

Mrs. Todhetley laughed as she opened it, saying it would have come sooner had we brought it with us. Looking to see that the bank-note was safe, she left it in the envelope on the breakfast-table.

"You may as well get it changed for me at Salmon's," she said, handing it to Tod as we were going out, "and then I need not disturb your father. But you must make haste back, for you know I want the money."

She had no money in the house save a few shillings: and this was why the note was to be posted to her if we stayed at Worcester. You are often run short for money in rural country places: it's quite different from town, where the banks are at hand.

We went through North Crabb, and met the doctor coming out at his door. Tod told him the Squire wanted some physicking.

"Got a cold, has he," cried Cole. "If he will only be reasonable and keep himself warm in bed, we'll soon have that out of him."

Cole lived close upon South Crabb—I think I've said so before. A few yards beyond his house the shops began. Salmon's was the fifth *from* the corner: a double shop, grocer's and

draper's. The savings' bank was at Salmon's, and the post-office: he was the busiest tradesman in South Crabb, rather conceited over it, but very intelligent. His brother was in business at Timberdale. This is what occurred.

"Will you be good enough to change this five-pound note for me, Mr. Salmon?" says Tod, laying the note down on the grocer's counter, on the left of the door, behind which Salmon stood, his grey hair carefully brushed and a white apron on.

Salmon takes the note up for a moment, and then unlocks the inner drawer of his till, where he kept his gold. He was counting out the five sovereigns when he paused; put them down, and picked up the note again with a snatch. I had seen his eyes fall on it.

"Where did you get this note from, sir?" asks he of Tod.

"From the Old Bank at Worcester."

"Well, it's one of them notes that was lost in the robbery at Tewkesbury, unless I'm much mistaken," cries Salmon, beginning to turn over the leaves of a small account-book that he fetched from the post-office desk. "Ay, I thought I was right," he adds, putting his finger to some figures on one of the pages. "I'd got the numbers correct enough in my head."

"You must be out of your mind, Salmon," retorts Tod in his defiant way. "That note

was paid to my father yesterday at Worcester Old Bank."

"I don't think it was, sir."

"You don't think it was! Why, I was present. I saw Mr. Isaac count the notes out himself. Ten of them; and that was one."

"Mr. Isaac never counted out this note," persists Salmon.

He smoothed it out on the counter as he spoke. I had not noticed it before: but it struck me now as I looked at it that it was *not* the note I had put into the envelope at Worcester. That was a new, crisp note; this was not crisp, and it looked a little soiled. Tod turned passionate over it: he was just like the Squire in some things.

"I don't understand your behaviour, Salmon. I can swear that this note was one given with the nine others at the bank yesterday, and given by Mr. Isaac."

Salmon shook his head. As much as to say he knew to the contrary.

"You'd better accuse Mr. Isaac of dealing in stolen notes—or me," cries hot Tod.

"You'd neither of you be likely to deal in them, Mr. Todhetley. There's a mistake somewhere. That's what it is. Mr. Isaac would be too glad to get this note into his possession to pay it away again. No people are more severe against money-robberies than *bankers.*"

Salmon talked, and Tod talked; but neither could agree. The apprentice behind the counter on the drapery side listened with admiration, evidently not knowing which side to take. I spoke then, saying that the note did not appear to be the same as the one I had enclosed in the letter; and Tod looked as though he could knock me down for saying it. I had changed my clothes and had not Anna Whitney's letter with me.

"Tod, it is of no use your taking it up in this way. If the thing is so, it *is*. And it can soon be proved. I say I don't think it is the same note, or the same numbers."

"If I had taken down the numbers of a bank-note, I could remember what they were; so would anyone but a muff, Johnny," says he, sarcastically.

"I don't remember what they were. But I do seem to remember that they were not these."

Tod flung out of the shop in a passion: to him it seemed impossible that anything could be wrong with a note had direct from the bank. As to its not being the same note, he scouted it utterly. Had it dropped through the envelope and changed itself *en route* from Worcester? he sarcastically demanded—coming in again to ask it.

Salmon was quietly going over the circumstances of the Tewkesbury robbery to me. About three *weeks before*, a butcher's shop was

robbed in Tewkesbury—the till carried off in open day. It had gold and silver in it and two five-pound notes. The numbers of the notes happened to be known, and notice of them was circulated, to put people on their guard against taking them.

"Look here, Mr. Ludlow," said Salmon, showing me the numbers of the stolen notes written down in his book, and comparing the one with the bank-note we had taken to him. "It's the same, you see. Reason's reason, sir."

"But I don't see how it's practicable," cried Tod, coming round the least bit in the world, as he condescended to look himself at the numbers.

"Well, sir, neither do I—the facts being as you state 'em," acknowledged Salmon. "But here's the proof to stagger us, you observe. It's in black and white."

"There must be two notes with the same numbers," said Tod.

Salmon smiled: great in his assumption of superior knowledge. "There never was yet, Mr. Todhetley."

"Who numbers the notes, I wonder? I suppose mistakes are not impossible to those who do it, any more than to other people."

"No fear of that, sir, with their system. The note has been changed in the post."

"*Nonsense!*" retorted Tod.

They'd have cavilled until night, with no result, one holding out against the other. Tod brought away the note and the five sovereigns —which Salmon offered. We could send over another note at leisure, he said. I examined the envelope after we had hastened home: it was the same we had posted at Worcester, and did not appear to have been tampered with.

Getting Anna Whitney's letter out of my best clothes' pocket, I brought it to Tod. The numbers were quite different from the note's. He stared like one bewildered: his eyes passing between those on the letter, and those on the note.

"Johnny, this beats bull-baiting."

So it did—for mystification.

"Are you sure you copied the figures correctly, old fellow?"

"Now, Tod! Of course I did."

"Let us go up to the Pater."

The Pater was getting up, in defiance of old Cole and of Mrs. Todhetley, and was dressed, up to his coat. He had got a fire in his room and his white night-cap on. I told him about the note. Tod was outside, telling Mrs. Todhetley. He did not receive the news kindly.

"The note I gave you to put into the envelope was one of those stolen from the butcher at Tewkesbury! How dare you bring your rubbishing stories to me, Mr. Johnny!"

I tried to explain how it was—that it was not

the same note; as the numbers proved. He'd hear nothing at first, only went on at me, stamping his slippers and nodding his head, the big white tassel of the night-cap bobbing up and down. If Salmon dared to say he had sent him a stolen note to change, he'd teach Salmon what slander meant the next day the magistrates sat.

Tod came in then with Mrs. Todhetley. The Squire had talked himself quiet, and I got a hearing: showing him the numbers I had taken down outside Anna's letter and the numbers on the stolen bank-note. It brought him to reason.

"Why, bless my heart! How can they have been changed, Johnny?"

Getting the packet of notes out of his pocket-book, he went over their numbers. They were all consecutive, the nine of them; and so was the tenth, the one I had taken down. He pushed his night-cap back and stared at us.

"Did you two get larking yesterday and drop the letter on your way to the post?"

"We took it straight to the post, sir, and put it safely in."

"I don't know that I'd answer for that," stormed the Squire. "Once dropped in the street, there's no knowing who might pick it up, or what tricks might be played with it. Hold your tongues, you two. How else do you suppose it could have been done? We *don't live in the* days of miracles."

Off went his night-cap, on went his coat. Ringing the bell until it was answered, he ordered the phaeton to be got ready on the instant, to take him to the station: he was going to Worcester. Mrs. Todhetley quite implored him not to go; as good as went down on her knees: he would increase his cold, and perhaps be laid up. But he'd not listen. "Hang the cold!" he said: "he had no cold; it was gone. People shouldn't have it to say that tricks could be played on him with impunity, and stolen notes substituted for honest ones."

"What a way he puts himself into!" laughed Tod, when he had ordered us off to make ready.

"I know somebody else who does just the same."

"You'll get it presently, Johnny."

Away we went to the station, Bob and Blister spanking along and Tod driving: the Squire, wrapped in about fifteen rugs and comforters, sitting beside him. The groom, Dwarf Giles, was behind with me: he would have to take the carriage back. A train came up pretty soon, and we reached Worcester.

Of all commotions, the Squire made the worst. When he got to the bank, Mr. Isaac was out: would not be in till three o'clock: and that put the finishing stroke on the Pater's impatience. Next he went to the Star, and told

of the matter there, gathering half the house about him. The post-office was taken next. They seemed to know nothing whatever about the letter—and I don't think they did—had not particularly noticed it in sorting: could not have seemed to see less had they been in a fog at sea: except one thing, and that they'd swear to —that every letter posted at the office the previous day, and all other days, had been duly forwarded, untampered with, to its destination.

The first dawn of reason that fell over us was in the interview with Mr. Isaac. It was pleasant to be with anybody so cheerfully calm. Taking the roll of five-pound notes in his hand, he pronounced them to be the same he had given us on the previous day; and the number I had dotted down to have been the one belonging to the tenth note.

"And is this one of those two stolen ones that were advertised?" demanded the Squire, putting it into Mr. Isaac's hands.

Mr. Isaac spoke with a clerk for a minute—perhaps referring to the numbers as Salmon had done—and came back saying that it was the note. So there we were: the matter laid, so far, to rest. Nothing could be more unsatisfactory. The Squire sat quite still, as if he had been struck dumb.

"I'm sure I shall never see daylight out of this," cried the Squire in a kind of hopeless, *mazy* tone. "It's worse than conjuring."

Mr. Isaac was called away. The Squire fastened upon one of the old clerks, and went over the matter with him. He could not readily understand it.

"The note must have been changed, Mr. Todhetley," said he.

"Changed in the post?"

"Changed somewhere."

"But who did it?"

"That's the question."

The Squire could not tear himself away. Once out of the bank he would be at a nonplus. He began casting a doubt on the Worcester post-office; the clerk retorted that there was a post-office at our end, Timberdale: and at that the Squire fired. Each would have held out for the good faith of his respective post-office to the death. It put Tod and me in mind of the fable of the crows, each old mother saying that her own young crow was the whitest. After glaring at one another for a bit through their spectacles, they shook hands and parted.

We got home to a late dinner at Crabb Cot, just as wise as we had left it in the morning. The Squire had an awful cold, though he'd not admit it. At nine o'clock he virtually gave in, went up to bed, and said Molly was to make him a basin of hot gruel, and we might put a drop of brandy in it.

The mode of conveying the letters from Worcester *was this.* The Timberdale bag,

made up at the Worcester office, was brought out at night by the late train, and dropped at the Timberdale station. The postmaster of Timberdale (if you can give that title to one in so insignificant a place) would be at the station to receive it, and carried it home.

His name was Rymer. A man of standing respectability in the place, and of good connections, the son of a clergyman. He had been brought up for a surgeon, but somehow never got the chance to pass; and, years and years ago, opened a chemist and druggist's shop at Timberdale. Then he added on other things: stationery, Christmas cards, valentines, boys' marbles, purses, and such like, which his wife attended to. In time he got the post-office. As to suspecting Rymer of doing anything wrong with the note, it was not to be thought of. He had two children: a son, who seemed never to do any good for himself, and if placed away from home would return to it again; and a daughter, a nice little girl of sixteen, who was as useful amid the drugs and the post-office work as her father.

Timberdale had two letter-carriers. One for the place itself, the other for the country round. This last had a regular journey of it, for the farm-houses were scattered. There had always been talk that our two houses—the Squire's and old Coney's—ought not to be put in the Timber*dale district* for delivery, and why it was origi-

nally done nobody could make out; seeing that we were ever so far off Timberdale, and in Crabb parish. But people did not bestir themselves to alter it, and so the old custom went on. The out-postman was Lee: a trustworthy old soul with shaky legs.

The next morning, Cole the surgeon came in, vexed. The Squire ought not to have got up at all the past day, he said, much less have gone to Worcester; and where was the use of his prescribing remedies if they were not attended to. Upon that, the Squire (after retorting that he should do as he pleased in spite of Cole and his remedies, and speaking out of a kind of foggy hoarseness) told about posting the bank-note to Mrs. Todhetley, and what had come of it.

"Well, it's a strange thing," said Cole, when he had turned the news about in his mind. "What do you think, Johnny?"

He would often say to me when talking of things and people "What do *you* think?" He had a theory that I saw clearly, just as Duffham at Church Dykely had. I had nothing particular to think about this: it seemed a hopeless puzzle.

"Lee's sure," said Cole, speaking of the postman; "so is Rymer. There are no other hands it could have been in on this side."

"The Worcester side say it was not tampered with on theirs."

"Have *you questioned* Rymer about it?"

"Not yet," croaked the Squire. "I meant to have gone to him to-day."

"Which you'll not do," cried Mr. Cole. "But now, look here: I'd not tell people at first that the substituted note was one of those stolen ones, if I were you: not even Rymer. Nobody likes to be mixed up with robberies. You'd put folks on their guard at once; and any chance word of enlightenment, that might otherwise be dropped, would be kept in."

We did not quite take him. "*I* would not," repeated Cole.

"But we must inquire about it," said Tod. "What's to be said of the note?"

"Say that the bank-note you put in was changed *en route* for another one: that the numbers did not tally. That's all you need tell at first."

Tod could not see any reason in the argument; but the Squire took up the idea eagerly, and ordered Tod to do as was suggested. He was unable to go to Timberdale himself, but was far too impatient to let it rest until another day, and so Tod was to be his deputy.

With at least five hundred suggestions and injunctions from the Squire—who only ceased when his voice disappeared completely—we set off, taking the way of the Ravine. It was a fine spring day: the trees were coming into leaf, the thorns and other bushes were budding; violets and primroses nestled at their feet. I *picked some* early cowslips for a ball for Lena,

and some double white sweet violets for Mrs. Todhetley.

Past Timberdale Court went we; past the church; past Jael Batty's and the other straggling cottages, and came to the village street. It was paved: and you can't say that of all villages.

Mr. Rymer was behind his counter: a delicate-faced, thin man, with a rather sad expression and mild brown eyes. In spite of his poor clothes and his white apron, and the obscure shop he had served in for twenty years, his face had "gentleman" plainly written in it: but he gave you the idea of being too meek-spirited; as if in any struggle with the world he could never take his own part.

The shop was a double shop, resembling Salmon's at South Crabb in shape and arrangements. The drugs and chemicals were on the left-hand side as you entered; the miscellaneous wares on the other. Horse and cattle medicines were kept with the drugs: and other things too numerous to mention, such as pearl barley, pickles, and fish-sauce. The girl, Margaret Rymer, was serving a woman with a penny-worth of writing-paper when we went in (three sheets to the penny), and a postage-stamp. Tod asked for Mr. Rymer.

He came forward from the little parlour, at one end of which was the desk where he did his postal work.

Upon Tod's saying that we wished to speak

with him privately, he took us into the parlour. As we sat down opposite to him, I could not help thinking what a nice face he had. It was getting very careworn. A stranger would have given him more than his forty-five years: though the bright brown hair was good still. Tod told his story. The chemist looked thoroughly surprised, but open and upright as the day. I saw at once that no fault attached to him.

"A bank-note exchanged as it passed through the post!" he exclaimed. "But, Mr. Joseph Todhetley, the thing seems impossible."

"It is so," said Tod. "I was just as unwilling to believe it at first: but facts are facts."

"I cannot see the motive," said Rymer. "Why should one bank-note be taken out of a letter, if another were substituted?"

Tod looked at me. Wanting to say that the other was a stolen note, and was no doubt put in to be got rid of. But the Squire had tied us down.

"Had the note been simply abstracted from the letter, we should be at no loss to understand that a thief had helped himself to it; but a thief would not put another note of the same value in its place," went on Rymer.

"Well, the facts are as I tell you, Mr. Rymer," returned Tod, inwardly impatient at being trammelled and having to tell so lame a tale. "One bank-note was taken out of the

letter and another put in its place. We want you to help us discover the mystery."

"I will help you to the utmost of my power," was Rymer's answer. "But—are you sure you have told me the circumstances correctly?"

"Quite sure," answered wrathful Tod. "The thing was done between Worcester post-office and our house. How it was done, and by whom, is the question."

"You enclosed the note in the letter yourself at Worcester on Wednesday afternoon, and put it into the post-office: when we delivered the letter at Crabb Cot yesterday morning, you found the note inside had been taken out and another put in? These are the circumstances?"

"Precisely so. Except that it was not I who enclosed the note and took down its number, but Johnny Ludlow. The Worcester office disclaims all fingering in the matter, and so we are thrown on this side of the journey. Did you go to the station yourself for the bag of letters, Rymer?"

"I did, sir. I brought it home and sorted the letters at that desk—turning to it—ready for the two men to take out in the morning. I had used to sort all the letters in the morning, London and others; but lately I've done what we call the local bags—that come in before bed-time—at night. It saves time in the morning."

"Do you recollect noticing the letter for Crabb Cot?"

"I think I noticed it. Yes, I feel sure I did. You see, there's often something or other for you, so that it's not remarkable. But I am sure I did notice the letter."

"No one could have got to it in the night?"

"What—here?" exclaimed Rymer, opening his eyes in surprise that such a question should be put. "No, certainly not. The letter-bags are locked up in this desk, and I keep the key about me."

"And you gave them as usual to Lee in the morning?"

Mr. Rymer knitted his patient brow the least in the world, as if he thought that Tod's pursuing these questions reflected some suspicion on himself. He answered very meekly—going over the whole from the first.

"When I brought the Worcester bag in on Wednesday night, I was at home alone: my wife and daughter happened to be spending the evening with some friends, and the servant had asked leave to go out. I sorted the letters, and locked them up as usual in one of the deep drawers of the desk. I never unlocked it again until the last thing in the morning, when the other letters that had come in were ready to go out, and the two men were waiting for them. The letter would be in Lee's packet, of course—which I delivered to him. But Lee is to be

depended on: he would not tamper with it. That is the whole history so far as I am connected with it, Mr. Joseph Todhetley. I could not tell you more if I talked till mid-day."

"What's that, Thomas? Anything amiss with the letters?" called out a voice at this juncture, as the inner door opened, that shut out the kitchen.

I knew it. Knew it for Mrs. Rymer's. I didn't like her a bit: and how a refined man like Rymer (and he was so in all respects) could have made her his wife seemed to me to be a seven days' wonder. She had a nose as long as from Crabb Ravine to the First of April; and her hair and face were red, and her flounces fine. As common a woman as you'd see in a summer's day, with a broad Brummagem accent, But she was very capable, and not unkindly natured. The worst Timberdale said of her was, that she had done her best to spoil that ugly son of hers.

Putting her head, ornamented with yellow curl-papers, round the door-post, she saw us seated there, and drew it away again. Her sleeves were stripped up, and she had a coarse apron on; altogether not dressed for company. Letting the door stand ajar, she asked again if anything was amiss, and went on with her work at the same time: which sounded like the chopping of suet. Mr. Rymer replied in a curt word or two, as if he felt annoyed she should inter-

fere. She would not be put off: strong-minded women never are: and he had to give the explanation. A five-pound bank-note had been mysteriously lost out of a letter addressed to Mrs. Todhetley. The chopping stopped.

"Stolen out of it?"

"Well—yes; it may be said so."

"But why do you call it mysterious?"

Mr. Rymer said why. That the bank-note had not, in one sense, been stolen; since another of the same value had been substituted for it.

Chop, chop, chop: Mrs. Rymer had begun again vigorously.

"I'd like to know who's to make top or tail of such a story as that," she called out presently. "*Has* anything been lost, or not?"

"Yes, I tell you, Susannah: a five-pound note."

Forgetting her curl-papers and the apron, Mrs. Rymer came boldly inside the room, chopping-knife in hand, and requested further enlightenment. We told her between us: she stood with her back against the door-post while she listened.

"When do you say this took place, young gents?"

"On Wednesday night, or Thursday morning. When the letter got to us at breakfast time, the job was done."

She said no more then, but went back and

chopped faster than ever. Tod and I had got up to go when she came in again.

"The odd part about it is, their putting in a note for the same value," cried she. "I never heard of such a thing as that. Why not spend the other note, and make no bother over it?"

"You would be quite justified in doing so under the circumstances, Mr. Todhetley," said the quieter husband.

"But we can't," returned Tod, hotly—and all but said more than he was to say.

"Why not?" asked she.

"Because it's not ours; there, Mrs. Rymer."

"Well, I know what I'd say—if the chance was given me," returned she, resenting Tod's manner. "That the note found in the letter was the one put into it at Worcester. Changed in the post! It does not stand to reason."

"But, my dear,"—her husband was beginning.

"Now, Thomas Rymer, that's what I *think:* and so would you, if you had a grain of sense beyond a gander's. And now good-morning, young gents: my pudding won't get done for dinner at this rate."

Mr. Rymer came with us through the shop to the door. I shook hands with him: and Tod's nose went up in the air. But I think it lies in what you see a man is, by mind and nature, whether he is your equal, and you feel proud to think he is—not in his wearing an apron. There are some lords in the land I'd

not half care to shake hands with as I would with Thomas Rymer.

"I hope you will pardon me for reverting to my first opinion, Mr. Todhetley," he said, turning to Tod—"but indeed I think there must be some mistake. Mrs. Rymer may be right—that the note found in the letter was the one put into it."

Tod flung away. The facts he had obstinately refused to believe at first, he had so fully adopted now, that any other opinion offended him. He was stamping when I caught him up.

"To think that the Pater should have sent us there like two fools, Johnny! Closing our mouths so that we could not speak the truth."

"Rymer only three parts believes it. His wife not at all."

"Sugar his wife! It's nothing to her. And all through the suggestion of that precious calf, Cole. Johnny, I think I shall act on my own judgment, and go back and tell Rymer the note was a stolen one."

"The Pater told us not to."

"Stuff! Circumstances alter cases. He would have told it himself before he had been with Rymer two minutes. The man's hands are partly tied, you see; knowing only half of the tale."

"Well; *I* won't tell him."

"Nobody asked you. Here goes. And the Squire will say I've done right."

Rymer was standing at his door still. The shop was empty, and there were no ears near. Tod lowered his voice, though.

"The truth is, Mr. Rymer, that the note, substituted in the letter for ours, was one of those two lost by the butcher at Tewkesbury. I conclude you heard of the robbery."

"One of those two!" exclaimed Rymer.

"Yes: Salmon at South Crabb recognised it yesterday, when we were asking him to give change for it."

"But why not have told me this at once, Mr. Joseph?"

"Because the Squire and Cole, laying their wise heads together this morning, thought it might be better not to let that much get abroad: it would put people on their guard, they said. You see now where the motive lay for the exchange of notes."

"Of course I do," said Mr. Rymer in his quiet way. "But it is very unaccountable. I cannot imagine where the treason lies."

"Not on this side, seemingly," remarked Tod. "The letter appears to have passed through nobody's hands but Lee's; and he is safe."

"Safe and sure. It must have been accomplished at Worcester. Or—in the railway train," he slowly added. "I have heard of such things."

"You had better keep counsel at present as to the stolen note, Mr. Rymer."

"I will until you give me leave to speak. All I can do to assist in the discovery is heartily at Squire Todhetley's service. I'd transport these rogues, for my part."

We carried our report home—that the thing had not been, and could not have been, effected on the Timberdale side, unless old Lee was to be suspected: which was out of the question.

Time went on, and it grew into more of a mystery than ever. Not as to the fact itself or the stolen note, for all that was soon known high and low. The Worcester office exonerated itself from suspicion, as did the railway letter-van. The van let off its resentment in a little private sneering: but the office waxed hot, and declared the fraud must lie at the door of Timberdale. And so the matter was given up for a bad job, the Squire submitting to the loss of his good note.

But a curious circumstance occurred, connected with Thomas Rymer. And, to me, his behaviour had seemed curious nearly throughout. Not at that first interview—as I said, he was open, and, so to say, indifferent then; but soon afterwards his manner changed.

On the day following that interview, the Squire, who was very restless over it, wanting *the thing* to come to light in no time, sent me

again to Rymer's place, to know if he had gleaned any news. Rymer said he had not; and his manner was just what it had been the past day. I could have staked my life, if necessary, that the man *believed* what he said—that news must be looked for elsewhere, not at Timberdale. I am sure that he thought it impossible that the theft could have been effected after the letters came into his hands. But some days later on, when the whole matter had been disclosed, and the public knew as much about it as we did, the Squire, well of his cold, except for sniffing, thought he would have a talk with Rymer himself, went over, and took me with him.

I shall not forget it. In Rymer's window, the chemical side, there was a picture of a bullock eating up some newly-invented cattle-food and growing fat upon it. It caught the Squire's eye. While he stopped to read the advertisement, I went in. The moment Rymer saw me —his daughter called to him to come out of the parlour where he was at dinner—his face turned first red, and then of a ghastly whiteness.

"Mr. Todhetley thought he would like to come and see you, Mr. Rymer."

"Yes, yes," he said, in an agitated kind of tone, and then he stooped to put some jars closer together under the counter; but I thought he knew how white he was, and wanted to hide it.

When the Squire came in, asking first of all about the new cattle-food, he noticed nothing. Rymer was pretty nigh himself then, and said he had taken the agency of it, and old Massock had ordered some.

Then they talked about the note. Rymer's tone was quite different from what it had been before; though whether I should have noticed it but for his white face I can hardly tell. That had made me notice *him*. He spoke in a low, timid voice, saying no more than he was obliged to say, as if the subject frightened him. One thing I saw—that his hands trembled. Some camomile blows lay on a white paper on the counter, and he began doing them up with shaky fingers.

Was his wife given to eavesdropping? I should have thought not—she was too independent for it. But there she was, standing just within the little parlour, and certainly listening. The Squire caught sight of her gown-tail, and called out, "How d'ye do, Mrs. Rymer?" upon which she came forward. There was a scared look on her face also, as if its impudence had shrunk out of it. She did not stay an instant—just answered the Squire, and went away again.

"We must come to the bottom of the business somehow, you know, Rymer," concluded the Squire, as he was leaving. "It would never do *to* let the thief get off. What I should think is,

that it must be the same fellow who robbed the butcher——"

"No, no," hastily interrupted Rymer.

"*No!* One of the gang, then. Any way, you'll help us all you can. I should like to bring the lot to trial. If you get to learn anything, send me word at once."

Rymer answered "Yes," and attended us to the door. Then the Squire went back to the cattle-food; but we got away at last.

"Thomas Rymer breaks, Johnny, I think. He doesn't seem in spirits somehow. It's hard for a man to be in a shop all day long, from year's end to year's end, and never get an hour's holiday."

Ever after this, when the affair was spoken of with Rymer, he showed more or less the same kind of shrinking—as if the subject gave him some terrible pain. Nobody but myself noticed it; and I only because I looked out for it. I believe he saw I thought something; for when he caught my eye, as he did more than once, his own fell.

But the curious circumstance connected with him has to be told yet. One summer evening, when it was getting towards dusk, he came over to Crabb Cot to see the Squire. Very much to the Pater's surprise, Rymer put a five-pound note into his hand.

"Is the money found?" cried he, eagerly.

"No, sir, it is not found," said Rymer, in a

subdued tone. "It seems likely to remain a mystery to the last. But I wish to restore it myself. It lies upon my conscience—being postmaster here—that such a loss should have taken place. With three parts of the public, and more, it is the Timberdale side that gets the credit of being to blame. And so—it weighs heavily upon me. Though I don't see how I could have prevented it: and I lie awake night after night, thinking it over."

The Squire stared for awhile, and then pushed back the note.

"Why, goodness, man!" cried he, when his amazement let him speak, "you don't suppose I'd take the money from you! What in the world!——what right have you to bear the loss? You must be dreaming."

"I should feel better satisfied," said poor Rymer, in his subdued voice of pain. "Better satisfied."

"And how do you think *I* should feel?" stamped the Squire, nearly flinging the note into the fire. "Here, put it up; put it up. Why, my good fellow, don't, for mercy's sake, let this bother take your senses away. It's no more your fault that the letter was rifled than it was mine. Well, this is a start—your coming to say this."

They went on, battling it out. Rymer praying him to take the note as if he'd pray his life away; the Squire accusing the other of having

gone clean mad, to think of such a thing. I happened to go into the room in the midst, but they had not leisure to look at me. It ended in Rymer's taking back the note: it could not have ended in any other manner: the Squire vowing, if he did not, that he should go before the magistrates for lunacy.

"Get the port wine, Johnny."

Rymer declined to take any: his head was not accustomed to wine, he said. The Squire poured out a bumper and made him drink it: telling him he believed it was something of the kind his head wanted, or it would never have got such a wild notion into it as the errand he had come upon that evening.

A few minutes after Rymer had left, I heard the Squire shouting to me, and went back to the room. He had in his hand a little thin note-case of green leather, something like two leaves folded together.

"Rymer must have dropped this, Johnny, in putting it into his pocket. The note is in it. You had better run after him."

I took it, and went out. But which way had Rymer gone? I could see far along the solitary road, and it was light enough yet, but nobody was in view, so I guessed he was taking the short-cut through the Ravine, braving the ghost, and I went across the field and ran down the zigzag path. Wasn't it gloomy there!

Well, *it was a surprise!* Thinking himself

alone, he had sat down on the stump of a tree, and was sobbing with all his might: great loud sobs and moans that prevented his hearing me. There was no time for me to draw back, or for him to hide his trouble. I could only hold out the green case, and make the best of it.

"I am afraid you are in some great trouble, Mr. Rymer?"

He got up and swallowed all his sobs at once. "The best of us have trouble at times, Master Johnny."

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Except forget that you have seen me giving way to it. It was very foolish of me: but there are moments when—when one loses self-control."

Either through his awkwardness or mine, the leaves of the case opened, and the bank-note fluttered out. I picked it up and gave it to him. Our eyes met in the gloom.

"I think you know," he whispered.

"I think I suspect. Don't be afraid: no one else does: and I'll never drop a hint to mortal man."

Putting my hand into his that he might feel its warm clasp, he took it as it was meant, and wrung it in answer. Had we been of the same age, I could have felt henceforth like his brother.

"It will be my death-blow," he whispered. "Heaven knows I was not prepared for it. I *was unsuspicious* as a child."

He went his way with his grief and his load of care, and I went mine, my heart aching for him. I am older now than I was then: and I have learnt to think that God sends these dreadful troubles to try us, that we may fly from them to Him. Why else *should* they come?

And I dare say you have guessed how it was. The time came when it was all disclosed; so I don't break faith in telling. That ill-doing son of Rymer's had been the thief. He was staying at home at the time with one of the notes stolen from Tewkesbury in his possession: some of his bad companions had promised him a bonus if he could succeed in passing it. It was his mother who surreptitiously got the keys of the desk for him, that he might open it in the night: he made the excuse to her that there was a letter in the Worcester bag for himself under a false direction, which he must secure, unsuspected. To do Madam Rymer justice, she thought no worse: and it was she who in her fright, when the commotion arose about the Tewkesbury note, confessed to her husband that she had let Ben have the keys that night. There could be no doubt in either of their minds after that. The son, too, had decamped. It was to look for our letter he had wanted the keys. For he knew it might be coming, with the note in it: he was on the platform at Timberdale railway station in the morning—I saw him standing

there—and must have heard what Mrs. Todhetley said. And that was the whole of the mystery.

But I'd have given the money from my own pocket twice over, to have prevented its happening, for Thomas Rymer's sake.

II.

A LIFE OF TROUBLE.

MRS. TODHETLEY says that you may sometimes read a person's fortunes in their eyes. I don't know whether it's true. She holds to it that when the eyes have a sad, mournful expression naturally, their owner is sure to have a life of sorrow. Of course such instances may be found: and Thomas Rymer's was one.

You can look back and read what was said of him: "A delicate-faced, thin man, with a rather sad expression and mild brown eyes. The sad expression was *in* the eyes: that was certain: thoughtful, dreamy, and would have been painfully sad but for its sweetness. But it is not given to everybody alike to discern this inward sadness in the look of another man.

It was of no avail to say that Thomas Rymer had brought trouble upon himself, and marred his own fortune. His father was a curate in Warwickshire, poor in pence, rich in children. Thomas was put apprentice to a doctor in

Birmingham, who was also a chemist and druggist. Tom had to serve in the shop, take out teeth, make up the physic, and go round with his master to fevers and rheumatisms. While he was doing this, the curate died: and thenceforth Thomas would have to make his own way in the world, with not a soul to counsel him.

Of course he might have made it. But Fate, or Folly, was against him. Some would have called it fate, Mrs. Todhetley for one; others might have said it was folly.

Next door to the doctor's was a respectable pork and sausage shop, carried on by a widow, one Mrs. Bates. Rymer took to go in there of an evening when he had the time, and sit in the parlour behind with Mrs. Bates and her two daughters. Failing money for theatres and concerts, knowing no friends to drop in at, young fellows drift away anywhere for relaxation when work is done. Mrs. Bates, a good old motherly soul, as fat as her best pig, bade him run in whenever he felt inclined. Rymer liked her for her hearty kindness, and liked uncommonly the dish of hot sausages, or chops, that used to come on the table for supper. The worst was, he grew to like something else—and that was Miss Susannah.

If it's true that people are attracted by their contrasts, there might have been some excuse for Rymer. He was quiet and sensitive, with *a refined* mind and person, and timid manners.

Susannah Bates was free, loud, good-humoured, and vulgar. Some people, it was said, called her handsome then; but, judging by what she was later, we thought it must have been quite a broad style of handsomeness. The Miss Bateses were intended by their mother to be useful; but they preferred to be stylish. They played "Buy a broom," and other fashionable tunes on the piano, spent time over their abundant hair, wore silks for best, carried a fan to chapel on Sundays, and could not be persuaded to serve in the shop on the busiest day. Good Mrs. Bates managed the shop herself with the help of her foreman: a steady young man, whose lodgings were up a court hard by.

Well, Tom Rymer, the poor clergyman's son, got to be as intimate there as if it were his home, and he and Susannah struck up a friendship that continued all the years he was at the next door. Just before he was out of his time, Mrs. Bates died.

The young foreman somehow contrived to secure the business for himself, and married the elder Miss Bates off-hand. There ensued some frightful squabbling between the sisters. The portion of money said to be due to Miss Susannah was handed to her with a request that she should find herself another home. Rymer came of age just then, and the first thing he did was to give her a home himself by making her his *wife*.

There was the blight. His prospects of advancement were over from that day. The little money she had was soon spent: he must provide a living how he could. Instead of going on to qualify himself for a surgeon, he took a situation as a chemist and druggist's assistant: and, later, set up for himself in the shop at Timberdale. For the first ten years of his married life, he was always intending to pass the necessary examinations: each year saying it should be done the next. But expenses came on thick and fast; and that great need with everybody, present wants, had to be served first. He gave up the hope then: went on in the old jog-trot line, and subsided into an obscure rural chemist and druggist.

The son, Benjamin, was intended for a surgeon. As a preliminary, he was bound apprentice to his father to learn the mysteries of drugs and chemicals. When out of his time, he was transferred to a chemist and druggist's at Tewkesbury, who was also in practice as a medical man. There, Mr. Benjamin fell in with bad companions; which lapse, in course of time, resulted in his coming home, and changing the note in our letter for the stolen one, and then decamping from Timberdale. What with the sharp blow the discovery itself was to Mr. Rymer, and what with the concealment of the weighty secret—for he had to conceal it: he could not go and tell of his own son—it pretty

nearly did for him. Rymer tried to make reparation in one sense—by the bringing of that five-pound bank-note to the Squire. For which the Squire, ignorant of the truth, thought him a downright lunatic.

For some months, after that evening, Thomas Rymer was to be seen in his shop as usual, getting to look like a yellow ghost. Which Darbyshire, the Timberdale doctor, said was owing to the liver, and physicked him well.

But the physic did not answer. Of all obstinate livers, as Darbyshire said, Rymer's was about the worst he'd ever had to do with. Some days he could not go into the shop at all, and Margaret, his daughter, had to serve the customers. She could make up prescriptions just as well as he and people grew to trust her. They had a good business. It was known that Rymer's drugs were genuine; had down direct from the fountain-head. He had given up the post-office, and the grocer opposite had taken to it: Salmon; who was brother to Salmon of South Crabb. In this uncertain way, a week sick, and a week tolerably well, Rymer continued to go on for about two years.

Margaret Rymer stood behind the counter: a neat little girl in grey merino. Her face was just like her father's; with the same delicate features, the sweet brown eyes, and the look of native refinement. Margaret belonged to his

side of the house; there was not an atom of the Brummagem Bateses in her. The Squire, who remembered her grandfather the clergyman, said Margaret took after him. She was in her nineteenth year now, and for steadiness you might have trusted her alone all over the world and back again.

She stood behind the counter, making up some medicine. A woman in a coarse brown cloak with a showy cotton handkerchief tied on her head, was waiting for it. It had been a dull autumn day: evening was coming on, and the air felt chill.

"How much be it, please, miss?" asked the woman, as Margaret handed her the bottle of mixture, done up nicely in white paper.

"Eighteenpence. Thank you."

"Be the master better?" the woman turned round from the door to inquire, as if the state of Mr. Rymer's health had been an after-thought.

"I think he is a little. He has a very bad cold, and is lying in bed to-day. Thank you for asking. Good-night."

When dusk came on, Margaret shut the street-door and went to the parlour. Mrs. Rymer sat there writing a letter. Margaret just glanced in.

"Mother, can you listen to the shop, please?"

"I can if I choose—what should hinder me?" responded Mrs. Rymer. "Where are you off to, Margaret?"

"To sit with my father for a few minutes."

"You needn't bother to leave the shop for that. I dare say he's asleep."

"I won't stay long," said Margaret. "Call me, please, if anyone comes in."

She escaped up the staircase, which stood in the nook between the shop and the parlour. Thomas Rymer lay back in the easy-chair by his bit of bedroom fire. He looked as ill as a man could look, his face thin and sallow, the fine nose pinched, the mild brown eyes mournful.

"Papa, I did not know you were getting up," said Margaret in a soft, low tone.

"Didn't you hear me, child?" was his reply, for the room was over the shop. "I've been long enough about it."

"I thought it was my mother stirring about."

"She has not been here all the afternoon. What's she doing?"

"I think she is writing a letter."

Mr. Rymer groaned—which might have been caused by the pain that he was always feeling. Mrs. Rymer's letters were few and far between, and written to one correspondent only—her son Benjamin. That Benjamin was random and must be getting a living in any chance way, or not getting one, and that he had never been at home for between two and three years, Margaret knew. But she knew no worse. The secret hidden between Mr. and Mrs. Rymer,

that they never spoke of to each other, had been kept from her.

"I wish you had not got up," said Margaret. "You are not well enough to come down to-night."

He looked at her, rather quickly; and spoke after a pause.

"If I don't make an effort—as Darbyshire tells me—it may end in my being a confirmed invalid, child. I must get down while I can, Margaret—while I can."

"You will get better soon, papa; Mr. Darbyshire says so," she answered, quietly swallowing down a sigh.

"Ay, I know he does. I hope it will be so, please God. My life has been only a trouble throughout, Margaret; but I'd like to struggle with it yet for all your sakes."

Looking at him as he sat there, the fire-light playing upon his worn face with its subdued spirit, you might have seen it was true—that his life had been a continuous trouble. Was he born to it? or did it only come upon him through marrying Susannah Bates? On the surface of things, lots seemed very unequally dealt out in this world. What had been the lot of Thomas Rymer? A poor son of a poor curate, he had known little but privation in his earlier years; then came the long drudgery of his working apprenticeship, then his marriage, *and the longer* drudgery of his life since. An

uncongenial and unsuitable marriage—and he had felt it to the back-bone. From twenty to thirty years had Rymer toiled in a shop late and early; never taking a day's rest or a day's holiday, for some one must be on duty always, and he had no substitute. Even on Sundays he must be at hand, lest his neighbours might be taken ill, and want drugs. If he went to church, there was no security that his servant-maid—generally a fat young woman in her teens, with a black face, rough hair, and waving a dirty dish-cloth—would not astonish the congregation by flying up to his pew-door to call him out. Indeed the vision was not so very uncommon. Where, then, could have been Rymer's pleasure in life? He had none: it was all work. And upon the work came the trouble.

Just as the daughter, Margaret, was like her father, so the son, Benjamin, resembled his mother. But for the difference of years, and that his red hair was short and hers long, he might have put on a lace cap, and sat for her portrait. He was the eldest of the children; Margaret the youngest; those between had died. Seven years between children makes a difference, and Margaret with her gentleness had always been afraid of rough Benjamin.

But whether a child's ugly or handsome, it's all the same to the parents; and for some years the only white spot in Thomas Rymer's life had been the love of his little Benjamin. For the

matter of that, as a child, Ben was rather pretty. He grew up and turned out wild; and it was just as bad a blow as could have fallen upon Rymer: but when that horrible thing was brought home to him—the taking of the bank-note out of the letter, and the substituting of the stolen one for it—then Rymer's heart gave in. Ever since that time it had been as good as breaking.

Well, that was Thomas Rymer's lot in life. Some people seem, on the contrary, to have nothing but brightness. Do you know what Mrs. Todhetley says?—that the greater the cloud here, the brighter will be the recompense hereafter. Looking at Thomas Rymer's face as the fire played on it—its goodness of expression, almost that of a martyr; remembering his prolonged battle with the world's cares, and his aching heart; knowing how inoffensive he had been to his fellow-creatures, ever doing them a good turn when it lay in his power, and never an ill one—one could but hope that his recompense would be of the largest.

"Had many people in this afternoon, Margaret?"

"Pretty well, papa."

Mr. Rymer sighed. "When I get stronger—"

"Margaret! Shop."

The loud coarse mouthful was Mrs. Rymer's. Margaret's spirit recoiled from it the least in the world. In spite of her having been brought

up to the "shop," there had always been something in her native refinement that rebelled against it and against the having to serve in it.

"A haperth o' liquorish" was the large order from a small child, whose head did not come much above the counter. Margaret served it at once: the liquorice, being often in demand, was kept done up in readiness. The child laid down the halfpenny and went out with a bang.

"I may as well run over with the letter," thought Margaret—alluding to an order she had written to London for some drug they were out of. "And there's my mother's. Mother," she added, going to the parlour-door, "do you want your letter posted?"

"I'll post it myself when I do," replied Mrs. Rymer. "Ain't it a'most time you got the gas lighted? That shop must be in darkness."

It was, nearly. But the gas was never lighted until really needed, in the interests of economy. Margaret ran across the road, put her letter into the post in Salmon's window, and ran back again. She stood for a moment at the door, looking at a huge lumbering caravan that was passing—a ménage on wheels, as seen by the light within its small windows. "It must be on its way to Worcester fair," she thought.

"Is it you, Margaret? How d'ye do?"

Some great rough man had come up, and was attempting to kiss her. Margaret started back with a cry. She *would* have closed the door

against him; but he was the stronger, and got in.

"Why, what possesses the child! Don't you know me?"

Every pulse within Margaret Rymer's body tingled to pain as she recognised him. It was her brother Benjamin. Better, than this, that it had been what she fancied—some rude stranger, who in another moment would have passed on and been gone. Benjamin's coming was always the signal for discomfort at home, and Margaret felt half paralysed with dismay.

"How are the old folks, Maggie?"

"Papa is very ill," she answered, her voice slightly trembling. "My mother is well as usual. I think she was writing to you this afternoon."

"Governor ill! so I've heard. Upstairs a good deal, is he not?"

"Quite half his time, I think."

"Who attends here?"

"I do."

"You!—you little mite! Brought your knowledge of rhubarb to good, eh? What's the matter with papa?"

"He has not been well for a long while. I don't know what it is. Mr. Darbyshire says"—she dropped her voice a little—"that he is sure there's something on his mind."

"Poor old dad!—just like him! If a woman

came in with a broken arm, he'd take it to heart."

"Benjamin, I think it is *you* that he has most at heart," the girl took courage to say.

Mr. Benjamin laughed heartily. "Me! He needn't have me. I am as steady as old Time, Maggie. I've come home to stay; and I'll prove to him that I am."

"Come home to stay!" faltered Margaret.

"I can take care of things here. I am better able to do it than you."

"My father will not put me out of my place here," said Margaret, steadily. "He has confidence in me; he knows I do things just as he does."

"And for that reason he makes you his substitute! Don't assume, Miss Maggie; you'd be more in your place stitching wristbands in the parlour than as the presiding genius in a drug-shop. How d'ye do, mother?"

The sound of his voice had reached Mrs. Rymer. She did not believe her own ears, and came stealing forth to look, afraid of what she might see. To give Madam Rymer her due, she was quite as honest-natured as her husband; and the matter of the bank-note, the wrong use made of the keys she was foolish enough to surreptitiously lend Mr. Benjamin, had brought her no light shock at the time. Ill-conduct, in the shape of billiards, and beer, and idleness, she had *found plenty of* excuse for in her son;

but when it came to felony, it was another thing.

"It *is* him!" she muttered, as he saw her, and turned.

"Where on earth have you sprung from?" demanded Mrs. Rymer.

"Not from the skies, mother. Hearing the governor was on the sick list, I thought I ought to come over and see him."

"None of your lies, Ben," said Mrs. Rymer. "*That* has not brought you here. You are in some disgraceful mess again."

"It *has* brought me here—and nothing else," said Ben: and he spoke truth. "Ashton of Timberdale——"

A faint groan—a crash as of the breaking of glass. When they turned to look, there was Mr. Rymer, fallen against the counter in his shock of surprise and weakness. His arm had thrown down a slight-made empty syrup-bottle.

And that's how Benjamin Rymer came home. His father and mother had never seen him since before the discovery of the trouble; for as soon as he had changed the bank-note in the letter, he was off. The affair had frightened him a little—that is, the stir made over it, which he had contrived to get notice of; since then he had been passably steady, making a living for himself in Birmingham as assistant to a surgeon and druggist. He had met Robert Ashton a *short* while ago (this was the account he now

gave), heard from that gentleman rather a bad account of his father, and so thought it his duty to give up what he was about, and come home. His duty! Ben Rymer's duty!!

Ben was a tall, bony fellow, with a passably liberal education. He might not have been unsteady but for bad companions. Ben did not aid in robbing the butcher's till—he had not quite come to that—neither was he privy to it; but he did get persuaded into trying to dispose of one of the stolen notes. It had been the one desperate act of his life, and it had sobered him. Time, however, effaces impressions; from two to three years had gone on since; nothing had transpired, never so much as a suspicion fallen on Mr. Benjamin, and he grew bold and came home.

Timberdale rubbed its eyes with astonishment that next autumn-day, when it woke up to see Benjamin Rymer in his father's shop, a white apron on, and serving the customers who went in, as naturally as though he had never left it. Where had he been all that while, they asked. Improving himself in his profession, coolly avowed Ben with unruffled face.

And so the one chance—rest of mind—for the father's uninterrupted return to health and life, went out. The prolonged time, passing without discovery, giving a greater chance day by day that it might never supervene, could but have a beneficial effect on Mr. Rymer. But when Ben made his appearance, put his head, so to

say, into the very stronghold of danger, all his sickness and his fear came back again.

Ben did not know why his father kept so poorly and looked so ill. Never a word, in his sensitiveness, had Mr. Rymer spoken to his son of that past night's work. Ben might suspect, but he did not know. Mr. Rymer would come down when he was not fit, and take up his place in the shop on a stool. Ben made fun of it: in sport more than ill-feeling: telling the customers to look at the old ghost there. Ben made himself perfectly at home; would sometimes hold a levée in the shop if his father was out of it, when he and his friends, young men of Timberdale, would talk and laugh the roof off: could noise have done it.

People talk of the troubles of the world, and say their name is legion: poverty, sickness, disappointment, disgrace, debt, difficulty; but there is no trouble the human heart can know like that brought by rebellious children. To old Rymer, with his capacity for taking things to heart, it had been as a long crucifixion. And yet—the instinctive love of a parent cannot die out: recollect David's grief for wicked Absolom: "Would God I had died for thee, my son, my son!'

Still, compared with what he used to be, Ben Rymer was steady. As the winter approached, there set in another phase of the reformation; for he pulled up even from the talking and

laughing, and became as good as gold. You might have thought he had taken his dead grandfather, the clergyman, for a model, and was striving to walk in his steps. He went to church, read his medical works, was pleasant at home, gentle with Margaret, and altogether the best son in the world.

"Will it last, Benjamin?" his father asked him sorrowfully.

"It shall last, father; I promise it," was the earnestly-spoken answer. "Forget the past, and I will never, I hope, try you again."

Ben kept his promise throughout the winter, and seemed likely to keep it always. Mr. Rymer grew stronger, and was in business regularly, which gave Ben more leisure for his books. It was thought that a good time had set in for the Rymers; but, as Mrs. Todhetley says, you cannot control Fate.

One day, when we were again staying at Crabb Cot, I had to call at the shop for a box of "Household Pills," Rymer's own making. When anybody was ailing at home, Mrs. Todhetley would administer a dose of these pills: two, or one, or half one, according to our ages and capacity for swallowing; for they were about as big as a small pumpkin. But that Rymer was so conscientious a man, I should have thought they were composed of bread and pepper.

Mrs. Todhetley pinned her faith to them, and said they did wonders.

Well, I had to go to Timberdale on other matters, and was told to call, when there, for a box of these delectable Household Pills. Mr. Rymer and his son stood behind the counter, the one making up his books, Ben pounding something in a mortar. Winter was just on the turn, and the trees and hedges were beginning to shoot into bud. Ben left his pounding to get the pills.

"Is this Mr. Rymer's? Halloa, Ben!—All right. How goes it, old boy?"

The door had been pushed open with a burst, and the above words were sent into our ears, in a tone not over-steady. They came from a man who wore sporting clothes, and his hat so much aside that it seemed to be falling off his head. Ben Rymer stared in surprise; his mouth dropped.

But that it was early in the day, and one does not like to libel people, it might have been thought the gentleman had taken a little too much of something strong. He swaggered up to the counter, and held out his hand to Ben. Ben, just then wrapping up the box of pills, did not appear to see it.

"Had a hunt after you, old fellow," said the loud stranger. "Been to Birmingham and all kinds of places. Couldn't think where you'd hid yourself."

"You are back pretty soon," growled Ben, who certainly seemed not to relish the visit.

"Been back a month. Couldn't get on in the New World; its folks are too down for me. I say, I want a word with you. Can't say it here, I suppose."

"No," returned Ben, rather savagely.

"Just you come out a bit, Ben," resumed the stranger, after a short pause.

"I can't," replied Ben—and his tone sounded more like I won't. "I have my business to attend to."

"Bother business! Here goes, then; it's your fault if you make me speak before people. Gibbs has come out of hiding, and he's getting troublesome——"

"If you will go outside and wait, I'll come to you," interrupted Ben at this, with summary quickness.

The man turned and swaggered out. Ben gave me the pills with one hand, and took off his apron with the other. Getting his hat, he was hastening out, when Mr. Rymer touched his arm.

"Who is that man, Benjamin?"

"A fellow I used to know in Tewkesbury, father."

"What's his name?"

"Cotton. I'll soon despatch him and be back again," concluded Ben, as he disappeared.

I put down half-a-crown for the pills, and Mr.

Rymer left his place to give me the change. There had been a kind of consciousness between us, understood though not expressed, since the night when I had seen him giving way to his emotion in Crabb Ravine. This man's visit brought the scene back again. Rymer's eyes looked into mine, and then fell.

"Ben is all right now, Mr. Rymer."

"I could not wish him better than he is. It's just as though he were striving to make atonement for the past. I thought it would have killed me at the time."

"I should forget it."

"Forget it I never can. You don't know what it was, Mr. Johnny," he continued in a kind of frightened tone, a red spot of hectic coming into his pale thin cheeks, "and I trust you never will know. I never went to bed at night but to lie listening for a summons at my door—the officers searching after my son, or to tell me he was taken; I never rose up in the morning but my sick spirit fainted within me, as to what news the day might bring forth."

Mr. Benjamin and his friend were pacing side by side in the middle of the street when I got out, probably to be out of the reach of eavesdroppers. They did not look best pleased with each other; seemed to be talking sharply.

"I tell you I can't and I won't," Ben was saying, as I passed them in crossing over. "What do you come after me for? When a

fellow wants to be on the square, you'll not let him. As to Gibbs——"

The voices died out of hearing. I went home with the pills, and thought no more about the matter.

Spring weather is changeable, as we English know. In less than a week, a storm of sleet and snow was drifting down. In the midst of it, who should present himself at Crabb Cot at mid-day but Lee the letter-carrier. His shaky old legs seemed hardly able to bear him up against the storm, as he came into the garden. I opened the door, wondering what he wanted.

"Please can I see the Squire in private, sir?" asked Lee, who was looking partly angry, partly rueful. Lee had never been in boisterous spirits since the affair of the bank note took place. Like a great many more people, he got fanciful with years, and could not be convinced but that the suspicion in regard to it lay on *him.*

"Come in out of the storm, Lee. What's up?"

"Please, Mr. Ludlow, sir, let me get to see the Squire," was all his answer.

The Squire was in his little room, hunting for a mislaid letter in the piece of furniture he called his bureau. As I shut old Lee in, I heard him, Lee, begin to say something about the bank-note and Benjamin Rymer. An instinct of the truth flashed over me—as sure as fate something connecting Ben with it had come out. In I

shot again, to make one at the conference. The Squire was looking too surprised to notice me.

"It was Mr. Rymer's son who took out the good note and put in the bad one?" he exclaimed. "Take care what you say, Lee."

Lee stood outside the worn hearth-rug; his old hat, covered with flakes of snow, held between his two hands. The Squire had put his back against the bureau and was staring at him through his spectacles, his nose and face of a finer red than ordinary.

The thing had been tracked home to Benjamin Rymer by the man Cotton, Lee explained in a rambling kind of tale. Cotton, incensed at Rymer's not helping him to some money—which was what he had come to Timberdale to ask for—had told in revenge of the past transaction. Cotton had not been connected with it, but knew of the part taken in it by Rymer.

"I don't believe a syllable of it," said the Squire stoutly, flinging himself into his bureau chair, which he twisted round to face the fire. "You can sit down, Lee. Where did you say you heard this?"

Lee had heard it at the Plough-and-Harrow, where the man Cotton had been staying. Jelf, the landlord, had been told it by Cotton himself, and Jelf in his turn had whispered it to Lee. That was last night: and Lee had come bursting up with it now to Mr. Todhetley.

"I tell you, Lee, I don't take in a syllable of it," repeated the Squire.

"It be true as gospel, sir," asserted Lee. "Last night, when I went in to Jelf's for a drop o' beer, being a'most stiff all over with the cold, I found Jelf in a passion because a guest had gone off without paying part of his score, leaving nothing but a letter to say he'd send it. Cotton by name, Jelf explained, and a sporting gent to look at. A good week, Jelf vowed he'd been there, living on the best. And then Jelf said I had no cause to be looked down upon any longer, for it was not me that had done that trick with the bank-notes, but Benjamin Rymer."

"Now just you stop, Lee," interrupted the Squire. "Nobody looked down upon you for it, or suspected you: neither Jelf nor other people. I have said it to you times enough."

"But Jelf knows I thought they did, sir. And he told me this news to put me a bit at my ease. He——"

"Jelf talks at random when his temper's up," cried the Squire. "If you believe this story, Lee, you'll believe anything."

"Ben Rymer was staying at home at the time, sir," urged Lee, determined to have his say. "If he is steady now, it's known what he was then. He must have got access to the letters somehow, while they lay at his father's that night, and opened yours and changed the note. Cotton says Mr. Ben had had the stolen

note hid about him for ever-so-long, waiting for an opportunity to get rid of it."

"Do you mean to accuse Mr. Ben of being one of the thieves that robbed the butcher's till?" demanded the Squire, getting wrathful.

"Well, sir, I don't go as far as that. The man told Jelf that one of the stolen notes was given to young Rymer to pass, and he was to have a pound for himself if he succeeded in doing it."

The Squire would hardly let him finish.

"Cotton said this to Jelf, did he?—and Jelf rehearsed it to you?"

"Yes, sir. Just that much."

"Now look you here, Lee. First of all, to whom have you repeated this tale?"

"Not to anybody," answered Lee. "I thought I'd better bring it up here, sir, to begin with."

"And you'd better let it stop here to end with," retorted the Squire. "That's my best advice to you, Lee. My goodness! Accuse a respectable man's son of what might transport him, on the authority of a drunken fellow who runs away from an inn without paying his bill! The likeliest thing is that this Cotton did it himself. How else should he know about it? Don't you let your tongue carry this further, Lee, or you may find yourself in the wrong box."

Lee looked just a little staggered. A faint *flush* appeared in his withered face. The

Squire's colour was at its fiercest. He was hard at the best of times to take in extraordinary tales, and utterly scouted this. There was no man he had a greater respect for than Thomas Rymer.

"I hoped you might be for prosecuting, sir. It would set me right with the world."

"You are a fool, Lee. The world has not thought you wrong yet. Prosecute! I! Upon this cock-and-bull story! Mr. Rymer would prosecute me in turn, I expect, if I did. You'd better not let this get to his ears: you might lose your post."

"Mr. Rymer, sir, must know how wild his son have been."

"Wild! Most of the young men of the present day are that, as it seems to me," cried the Squire in his heat. "Mine had better not let me catch *them* at it, though. I'd warm their ears well beforehand if I thought they ever would——Do you hear, Mr. Johnny?"

I had been leaning on the back of a chair in the quietest corner for fear of being sent away. When the Squire put himself up like this, he'd say anything.

"To be a bit wild is one thing, Lee; to commit felony quite another: Rymer's son would be no more guilty of it than you would. It's out of all reason. And do you take care of your tongue. Look here, man: suppose I took this up, as you want me, and it was found to

have been Cotton or some other gaol-bird that did it, instead of young Rymer: where would you be? In prison for defamation of character, if the Rymers chose to put you there. Be wise in time, Lee, and say no more."

"It might have been as you say, sir—Cotton himself; though I'm sure that never struck me," returned Lee, veering round to the argument. "One thing that made me believe it, was the knowing that Ben Rymer might easily get access to the letters."

"And that's just the reason why you should have doubted it," contradicted the Squire. "He'd be afraid to touch them because of the ease. Forgive you for coming up, you say?" added the Squire, as Lee rose with some humble words of excuse. "Of course I will. But don't you forget that a word of this, dropped abroad, might put your place, as letter-man, in jeopardy."

"And that would never do," said Lee, shaking his head.

"*I* should think not. It's cold to-day, isn't it?"

"Frightful cold, sir."

"And you could come through it with this improbable story! Use your sense another time, Lee. Here, Johnny, take Lee into the kitchen, and tell them to give him some cold beef and beer."

I handed him over, with the order, to Molly;

who went into one of her tantrums at it, for she was in the midst of pastry-making. The Squire was sitting with his head bent, looking as perplexed as an owl, when I got back to the room.

"Johnny—shut the door. Something has got into my mind. Do you recollect Thomas Rymer's coming up one evening, and wanting to give me a five-pound note?"

"Quite well, sir."

"Well; I—I am not so sure now that there's nothing in this fresh tale."

"I sat down; and in a low voice told him all. Of the sobbing fit in which I had found Rymer that same night in the Ravine; and that I had known all along it *was* the son who had done it.

"Bless my heart!" cried the Squire softly, very much taken aback. "It's that perhaps that has been making Rymer so ill."

"He said it was slowly killing him, sir."

"Mercy on him!—poor fellow! An ill-doing scapegrace of a rascal! Johnny, how thankful we ought to be when our sons turn out well, and not ill! But I think a good many turn out ill nowadays. If you should live to have sons, sir, take care how you bring them up."

"I think Mr. Rymer must have tried to bring Ben up well," was my answer.

"Yes; but did the mother?" retorted the Squire. "More responsibility lies with them than with the father, Johnny: and she spoilt him. Take care, sir, how you choose a wife when

the time comes. And there was that miserable lot the lad fell in with at Tewkesbury! Johnny, that Cotton must be an awful blackguard."

"I hope he'll live to feel it."

"Look here, we must hush this up," cried the Squire, sinking his voice and glancing round the room. "I'd not bring fresh pain on poor Rymer for the world. You must forget that you've told me, Johnny."

"Yes, that I will."

"It's only a five-pound note, after all. And if it were fifty pounds, I'd not stir in it. No, nor for five hundred; be hanged if I would! It's not I that would bring the world about Thomas Rymer's ears. I knew his father and respected him, Johnny; though his sermons were three quarters of an hour long; and I respect Thomas Rymer. You and I must keep this close. And I'll make a journey to Timberdale when this snow-storm's gone, Johnny, and frighten Jelf out of his life for propagating libellous tales."

That's where it ought to have ended. The worst is, "oughts" don't go for much in the world; as perhaps every reader of this paper has learned to know.

When Lee appeared the next morning with the letters as usual, I went out to him. He dropped his voice to speak, as he put them in my hand.

"They say Benjamin Rymer is off, sir."

"Off where?"

"Somewhere out of Timberdale."

"Off for what?"

"I don't know, sir. Jelf accused me of having carried tales there, and called me a jackass for my pains. He said that what he had told me wasn't meant to be repeated again, and I ought not to have gone canking it about, especially to the Rymers theirselves; that it might not be true——"

"As the Squire said, yesterday, you know, Lee."

"Yes, sir. I answered Jelf that it couldn't have been me that had gone canking to the Rymers, for I had not as much as seen them. Any way, he said, somebody had, for they knew of it, and Benjamin had gone off in consequence. Jelf's as cross over it as two sticks put cornerwise. It's his own fault; why did he tell me what wasn't true?'

Lee went off—looking cross also. After breakfast I related this to the Squire. He didn't seem to like it, and walked about thinking.

"Johnny, I can't stir in it, you see," he said presently. "If it got abroad, people might talk about compromising a felony, and all that sort of rubbish: and I am a magistrate.. You must go. See Rymer: and make him understand—without telling him in so many words, you know—that there's nothing to fear from me, and he may call Ben back again. If the

young man has set-in to lead a new life, heaven forbid that I, having sons myself, should be a stumbling-block in the way of it."

It was striking twelve when I reached Timberdale. Margaret said her father was poorly, having gone out in the storm of the previous day and got a chill. He was in the parlour alone, cowering over the fire. In the last few hours he seemed to have aged years. I shut the door.

"What has happened?" I whispered. "I have come on purpose to ask you."

"That which I have been dreading all along," he said, in a quiet, hopeless tone. "Benjamin has run away. He got some information, it seems, from the landlord of the Plough and Harrow, and was off the next hour."

"Well, now, the Squire sent me to you privately, Mr. Rymer, to say that Ben might come back again. He has nothing to fear."

"The Squire knows it, then!"

"Yes. Lee came up about it yesterday: Jelf had talked to him. Mr. Todhetley did not believe a word: he blew up Lee like anything for listening to such a tale; he means to blow up Jelf for repeating anything said by a vagabond like Cotton. Lee came round to his way of thinking. Indeed there's nothing to be afraid of. Jelf is eating his words. The Squire would not harm your son for the world."

Rymer shook his head. He did not doubt

the Squire's friendly feeling, but thought it was out of his hands. He told me all he knew about it.

"Benjamin came to me yesterday morning in a great flurry, saying something was wrong, and he must absent himself. Was it about the bank-note, I asked—and it was the first time a syllable in regard to it had passed between us," broke off Mr. Rymer. "Jelf had given him a friendly hint of what had dropped from the man Cotton—you were in the shop that first day when he came in, Mr. Johnny—and Benjamin was alarmed. Before I had time to collect my thoughts, or say further, he was gone."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. I went round at once to Jelf, and the man told me all. Jelf knows the truth; that is quite clear. He says he has spoken only to Lee; is sorry now for having done that, and he will hush it up as far as he can."

"Then it will be quite right, Mr. Rymer. Why should you be taking it in this way?"

"I am ill," was all he answered. "I caught a chill going round to the Plough and Harrow. So far as mental sickness goes, we may battle it to the end, strength from Above being lent to us; but when it takes a bodily shape—why there's nothing for it but giving in."

Even while we spoke, he was seized with what seemed to be an ague-fit. Head, and legs,

and arms, and teeth, and the chair he sat in, all shook together. Mrs. Rymer appeared with some scalding-hot broth, and I said I'd run for Darbyshire.

A few days went on, and then news came up to Crabb Cot that Mr. Rymer lay dying. Robert Ashton, riding back from the hunt in his scarlet coat and white cords on his fine grey horse (the whole a mass of splashes with the thaw) pulled up at the door to say How d'ye do; and mentioned it amidst other items. It was just a shock to the Squire, and nothing less.

"Goodness preserve us!—and all through that miserable five-pound note, Johnny!" he cried in a wild flurry. "Where's my hat and top-coat?"

Away to Timberdale by the short cut through the Ravine, never heeding the ghost—although its traditional time of appearing, the dusk of evening, was drawing on—went the Squire. He thought Rymer must be ill through fear of him; and he accused me of having done my errand of peace badly.

It was quite true—Thomas Rymer lay dying. Darbyshire was coming out of the house as the Squire reached it, and said so. Instead of being sorry, he flew in a passion and attacked the doctor.

"Now look you here, Darbyshire—this won't do. We can't have people dying off like this

for nothing. If you don't cure him, you had better give up doctoring."

"How d'ye mean for nothing?" asked Darbyshire, who knew the Squire well.

"It can't be for much: don't be insolent. Because a man gets a bit of anxiety on his mind, is he to be let die?"

"I've heard nothing about anxiety," said Darbyshire. "He caught a chill through going out that day of the snowstorm, and it settled on a vital part. That's what ails him, Squire."

"And you can't cure the chill! Don't tell me."

"Before this time to-morrow, Thomas Rymer will be where there's neither killing nor curing," was the answer. "I told them yesterday to send for the son: but they don't know where he is."

The Squire made a rush through the shop and up to the bedroom, hardly saying, With your leave, or By your leave. Thomas Rymer lay in bed at the far end; his white face whiter than the pillow; his eyes sunken; his hands outside, plucking at the counterpane. Margaret left the room when the Squire went in. He gave one look; and knew that he saw Death there.

"Rymer, I'd almost have given my own life to save you from this," cried he in the shock. "Oh, my goodness! what's to be done?"

"I seem to have been waiting for it all along; to have seen the exposure coming," said Thomas

Rymer, his faint fingers resting in the Squire's strong ones. "And now that it's here, I can't do battle with it."

"Now, Rymer, my poor fellow, couldn't you —*couldn't* you make a bit of an effort to live? To please me: I knew your father, mind. It can't be right that you should die."

"It must be right; perhaps it is well. I can truly say with old Jacob that few and evil have the days of my life been. Nothing but disappointment has been my lot here; struggle upon struggle, pain upon pain, sorrow upon sorrow. I think my merciful Father will remember it in the last Great Account."

He died at five o'clock in the morning. Lee told us of it when he brought up the letters at breakfast-time. The Squire let fall his knife and fork.

"It's a shame and a sin, though, Johnny, that sons should inflict this cruel sorrow upon their parents," he said later. "Rymer has been brought down to the grave by his son before his hair was grey. I wonder how *their* accounts will stand at the Great Reckoning?"

III.

HESTER REED'S PILLS.

WE were at our other and chief home, Dyke Manor: and Tod and I were there for the short Easter holidays, shorter in those days than in these.

It was Easter Tuesday. The Squire had gone riding over to old Jacobson's with Tod. I, having nothing else to do, got the Mater to come with me for a practice on the church organ; and we were taking the round home again through the village, Church Dykely.

Easter was that year very late. It was getting towards the end of April: and, to judge by the weather, it might have been the end of May, the days were so warm and glorious.

In passing the gate of George Reed's cottage, Mrs. Todhetley stopped.

"How are the babies, Hester?"

Hester Reed, sunning her white cap and clean cotton gown in the garden, the three elder children around, watering the beds with a doll's

watering-pot, and a baby hiding its face on her shoulder, dropped a curtsey as she answered.

"They be but poorly, ma'am, thank you. Look up, Susy," turning the baby's face upwards to show it: and a pale mite of a face it was, with sleepy eyes. "For a day or two past they've not seemed the thing; and they be both cross."

"I should think their teeth are troubling them, Hester."

"Maybe, ma'am. I shouldn't wonder. Hetty, she seems worse than Susy. She's a-lying there in the basket indoors. Would you please spare a minute to step in and look at her, ma'am?"

Mrs. Todhetley opened the gate. "I may as well go in and see, Johnny," she said to me in an undertone: "I fear both the children are rather sickly."

The other baby, "Hetty," lay in the kitchen in a clothes-basket. It had just the same sort of puny white face as its sister. These two were twins, and about a year old. When they were born, Church Dykely went on finely at Hester Reed, asking her if she would not have had enough with one new child but she must go and set up two.

"It does seem very poorly," remarked Mrs. Todhetley, stooping over the young mortal (which was not cross just now, but very still and quiet), and letting it clasp its little fist round one of her fingers. "No doubt it is the teeth.

If the children do not get better soon, I think, were I you, Hester, I should speak to Mr. Duffham."

The advice seemed to strike Hester Reed all of a heap. "Speak to him! to Dr. Duffham!" she exclaimed. "Why, ma'am, they must both be a good deal worse than they be, afore we does that. I'll give 'em a dose o' mild physic apiece; I dare say that'll bring 'em round."

"I should think it would not hurt them," assented Mrs. Todhetley. "They both seem feverish; this one especially. I hear you have had Cathy over," she went on, passing to another subject.

"Sure enough us have," said Mrs. Reed. "She come over yesterday was a week and stayed till Friday night."

"And what is she doing now?"

"Well, ma'am, Cathy's keeping herself; and that's something. She has got a place at Tewkesbury to serve in some shop; is quite in clover there, by all accounts. Two good gownds she brought over to her back; and she's pretty nigh as light-hearted as she was afore she went off to enter on her first troubles."

"Hannah told me she was not looking well."

"She have had a nasty attack of—what was it?—neuralgy, I think she called it, and been obliged to go to a doctor," answered Hester Reed. "That's why they gave her the holiday. She was very well while she was here."

I had stood at the door, talking to the little ones with their watering-pot. As the Mater was taking her last final word with Mrs. Reed, I went on to hold open the gate for her, when some woman whisked round the corner from Piefinch Lane, and in at the gate.

"Thank ye, sir," said she to me: as if I had been holding it open for her especial benefit.

It was Ann Dovey, the blacksmith's wife down Piefinch Cut: a smart young woman fond of fine gowns and caps. Mrs. Todhetley came away, and Ann Dovey went in. And this is what passed at Reed's—as leaked out to the world afterwards.

The baby in the basket began to cry, and Ann Dovey lifted it out and took it on her lap. She understood all about children, having been the eldest of a numerous flock at home, and was no doubt all the fonder of them because she had none of her own. Mrs. Dovey was moreover a great gossip, liking to have as many fingers in her neighbours' pies as she could conveniently get in.

"And now what's amiss with these here two twins?' asked she in a confidential tone, bending her face forward till it nearly touched Mrs. Reed's, who had sat down opposite to her with the other baby. "Sarah Tanken, passing our shop just now, telled me they warn't the thing at all, so I thought I'd run round."

"Sarah Tanken looked in while I was a-

washing up after dinner, and saw 'em both," assented Mrs. Reed. "Hetty's the worst of the two; more peeky like."

"Which *is* Hetty?" demanded Ann Dovey; who, with all her neighbourly visits, had not learnt to distinguish the two apart.

"The one that you be a-nursing."

"Did the mistress of the Manor look at 'em?"

"Yes: and she thinks I'd better give 'em both some mild physic. Leastways, I said a dose might bring 'em round," added Hester Reed, correcting herself, "and she said it might."

"It's the very thing for 'em, Hester Reed," pronounced Mrs. Dovey, decisively. "There's nothing like a dose of physic for little ones: it often stops a bout of illness. You give it to the two; and don't lose no time. Grey powder's best."

"I've not got any grey powder by me," said Mrs. Reed. "It crossed my mind to try 'em with one o' them pills I had from Abel Crew."

"What pills be they?"

"I had 'em from him for myself the beginning o' the year, when I was getting the headache so much. They be as mild as mild can be; but they did me good. The box is upstairs."

"How do you know they'd be the right pills to give to babies?" sensibly questioned Mrs. Dovey.

"Oh, they be right enough for that! When little Georgy was poorly two or three weeks

back, I ran out to Abel Crew, chancing to see him go by the gate, and asked whether one of his pills would do the child harm. He said no, it would do him good."

"And did it get him round?"

"I never gave it. Georgy seemed to be so much pearter afore night came, that I thought I'd wait till the morrow. He's a rare bad one to take physic, he is. You may cover a powder in treacle that thick, Ann Dovey, but the boy scents it out somehow, and can't be got to touch it. His father always has to make him; I can't. He got well that time without the pill."

"Well, I should try the pills on the two little twins," advised Ann Dovey. "I'm sure they want something o' the sort. Look at this one! lying like a lamb in my arms, staring up at me with its poor eyes, and never moving. You may always know when a child's ill by its quietness. Nothing ailing 'em, they worry the life out of you."

"Both of them were cross enough this morning," remarked Hester Reed, "and for that reason I know they be worse now. I'll try the pill to-night."

Now, whether it was that Ann Dovey had any especial love for presiding at the ceremony of administering pills to children, or whether she only looked in again incidentally in passing, certain it was that in the evening she was for the second time at George Reed's cottage.

Mrs. Reed had put the three elder ones to bed; or, as she expressed it, "got 'em out o' the way;" and was undressing the twins by firelight, when Ann Dovey tripped into the kitchen. George Reed was at work in the front garden, digging; though it was getting almost too dark to see where he inserted the spade.

"Have ye give 'em their physic yet?" was Mrs. Dovey's salutation.

"No, but I'm a-going to," answered Hester Reed. "You be just come in time to hold 'em for me, Ann Dovey, while I go upstairs for the box."

Ann Dovey received the pair of babies, and sat down in the low chair. Taking the candle, Mrs. Reed ran upstairs to the room where the elder children slept. The house was better furnished than cottages generally are, and the rooms were of a fairly good size. Opposite the bed stood a high deal press with a flat top, which Mrs. Reed made a shelf of, for keeping things that must be out of the children's reach. Stepping on a chair, she put her hand out for the box of pills, which stood in its usual place near the corner, and went downstairs with it.

It was an ordinary pasteboard pill-box, containing a few pills—six or seven, perhaps. Mrs. Dovey, curious in all matters, lifted the lid and smelt at the pills. Hester Reed was getting the moist sugar they were to be administered in.

"What did you have these here pills for?"

questioned Ann Dovey, as Mrs. Reed came back with the sugar. "They bain't over big."

"For headache, and pain in the side. I asked old Abel Crew if he could give me something for it, and he gave me these pills."

Mrs. Reed was moistening a teaspoonful of the sugar, as she spoke, with warm water. Taking out one of the pills she proceeded to press it into little bits, and then mixed it with the sugar. It formed a kind of paste. Dose the first.

"That ain't moist enough, Hester Reed," pronounced Mrs. Dovey, critically.

"No? I'll put a drop more warm water."

The water was added, and one of the children was fed with the delectable compound—Hetty. Mrs. Dovey spoke again.

"Is it all for her? Won't a whole pill be too much for one, d'ye think?"

"Not a bit. When I asked old Abel whether one pill would be too much for Georgy, he said, No—two wouldn't hurt him. I tell ye, Ann Dovey, the pills be as mild as milk."

Hetty sucked in the whole dose by degrees. Susy had a similar one made ready, and swallowed it in her turn. Then the two babies were conveyed upstairs and put to bed side by side in their mother's room.

Mrs. Dovey, the ceremony being over, took her departure. George Reed came in to his early supper, and soon afterwards he and his *wife went up* to bed. Men who have to be up

at five in the morning, must go to rest betimes. The fire and candle were put out, the doors locked, and the cottage was steeped in quietness at a time when in larger houses the evening was not much more than beginning.

How long she slept, Mrs. Reed could not tell. Whether it might be the first part of the night, early or late, or whether morning might be close upon the dawn, she knew not; but she was startled out of her sleep by the cries of the babies. Awful cries, they seemed, coming from children so young; and there could be no mistake that each of them was in terrible agony.

"Why, it's convulsions!" exclaimed George Reed, when he had got a candle. "Both of them, too!"

Going downstairs as he was, he hastily lighted the kitchen fire and put a kettle of water on. Then, dressing himself, he ran out for Mr. Duffham. The doctor came in soon after George Reed had got back again.

Duffham was accustomed to scenes, and he entered on one now. Mrs. Reed, in a state of distress, had put the babies in blankets and brought them down to the kitchen fire; the three elder children, aroused by the cries, had come down too, and were standing about in their night-clothes, crying with fright. One of the babies was dead—Hetty. She had just expired in her father's arms. The other was dying.

"What on earth have you been giving to these children?" exclaimed Duffham, after taking a good look at the two.

"Oh, sir, what is it, please?" sobbed Mrs. Reed in her terror. "Convulsions?"

"Convulsions—no," said the doctor, in a fume. "It is something else, as I believe—poison."

At which she set up a shriek that might have been heard out of doors.

Well, Hetty was dead, I say; and Duffham could not do anything to save the other. It died while he stood there. Duffham repeated his conjecture of poison; and Mrs. Reed, all topsy-turvy though she was, three parts bereft of her senses, resented the implication almost angrily.

"Poison!" cried she. "How can you think of such a thing, sir?"

"I tell you that to the best of my belief these children have both died from some irritant poison," asserted Duffham, coolly imperative. "I ask what you have been giving them."

"They have not been well this three or four days past," replied she, wandering from the point; not in evasion, but in her mind's bewilderment. "It must have been their teeth, sir; I thought they were cutting 'em with fever."

"Did you give them any physic?"

"Yes, sir. A pill apiece when I put 'em to bed."

"Ah!" said Mr. Duffham. "What pill was it?"

"One of Abel Crew's."

This answer surprised him. Allowing that his suspicion of poison was correct, he assumed that these pills must have contained it; and he had never had cause to suppose that Abel Crew's pills were otherwise than innocent.

Mrs. Reed, her voice broken by sobs, explained further in answer to his questions, telling him how she had procured these pills from Abel Crew some time before, and had given one of the said pills to each of the babies. Duffham stood against the dresser, taking it all in with a solemn face, his cane held up to his chin.

"Let me see this box of pills, Mrs. Reed."

She went upstairs to get it. A tidy woman in her ways, she had put the box in its place again, atop of the press. Duffham took off the lid, and examined the pills.

"Do you happen to have a bit of sealing-wax in the house, George Reed?" he asked presently.

George Reed, who had stood like a man dazed, looking first on one, then on the other of his dead little ones, answered that he had not. But the eldest child, Annie, spoke up, saying that there was a piece in her little work-box; Cathy had given it her last week when she was at home.

It was produced—part of a small stick of fancy wax, green and gold. Duffham wrapped the pill-box up in the back of a letter that he took from his pocket, and sealed it with a seal that hung to his watch-chain. He put the parcel into the hand of George Reed.

"Take care of it," he said. "This will be wanted."

"There could not have been poison in them pills, sir," burst out Mrs. Reed, her distress increasing at the possibility that he might be right. "If there had been, they'd ha' poisoned me. One night I took three of 'em."

Duffham did not answer. He was nodding his head to his own thoughts.

"And who ever heard of Abel Crew mixing up poison in his pills?" went on Mrs. Reed. "If you please, sir, I don't think he could do it."

"Well, that part of it puzzles me—how he came to do it," acknowledged Duffham. "I like old Abel, and shall be sorry if it is proved that his pills have done the mischief."

Mrs. Reed shook her head. She had better faith than that in Abel Crew.

Ever so many years before—for it was in the time of Sir Peter Chavasse—there appeared one day a wanderer at Church Dykely. It was hot weather, and he seemed to think nothing of en*camping* out in the fields by night, under the

summer stars. Who he was, or what he was, or why he had come, or why he stayed, nobody knew. He was evidently not a tramp, or a gipsy, or a travelling tinker—quite superior to it all; a slender, young, and silent man, with a pale and gentle face.

At one corner of the common, spreading itself between the village and Chavasse Grange, there stood a covered wooden shed, formerly used to impound stray cattle, but left to itself since the square space for the new pound had been railed round. By-and-by it was found that the wanderer had taken to this shed to sleep in. Next, his name leaked out—"Abel Crew."

He lived how he could, and as simply as a hermit. Buying a penny loaf at the baker's, and making his dinner of it with a handful of sorrel plucked from the fields, and a drink from the rivulet that ran through the wilderness outside the Chavasse grounds. His days were spent in examining roots and wild herbs, now and then in digging one up; and his nights mostly in studying the stars. Sir Peter struck up a kind of speaking acquaintanceship with him, and, it was said, was surprised by his stock of knowledge and at the extent of his travels; for he knew personally many foreign places where even Sir Peter himself had never been. That may have caused Sir Peter—who was lord of the manor and of the common included—to tolerate in him what *it* was supposed he would

not in others. Any way, when Abel Crew began to dig the ground about his shed, and plant roots and herbs in it, Sir Peter let him do it and never interfered. It was quite the opposite; for Sir Peter would sometimes stand to watch him at his work, talking all the while.

In the course of time there was quite an extensive garden round the shed—speaking comparatively, you know, for we do not expect to see a shed garden as large as that of a mansion. It was fenced in with a hedge and wooden palings, all the work of Abel Crew's hands. Sir Peter was dead then; but Lady Chavasse, guardian of the young heir, Sir Geoffry, extended to him the same favour that her husband had, and, if she did not absolutely give sanction to what he was doing, she at any rate did not oppose. Abel Crew filled his garden with rare and choice and useful field herbs, the valuable properties of which he alone understood; and of ordinary sweet flowers, such as bees love to suck. He set up bee-hives and sold the honey; he distilled lavender and bergamotte for perfumes; he converted his herbs and roots into medicines, which he supplied to the poor people around, charging so small a price for them that it could scarcely more than cover the cost of making, and not charging at all the very poor. At the end of about ten years from his first appearance, he knocked down the old shed, and built up a convenient cottage in its place, doing

it all with his own sole pair of hands. And the years went on and on, and Abel Crew and his cottage, and his herbs, and his flowers, and his bees, and his medicines, were just as much of an institution in the parish as was the Grange itself.

He and I became good friends. I liked him. You have heard how I take likes and dislikes to faces, and I rarely saw a face that I liked as I liked Abel Crew's. Not for its beauty, though it really was beautiful, with its perfect shape and delicately carved features; but for its unmistakable look of goodness and its innate refinement—perhaps also for the deep, far-seeing, and often *sad* expression that sat in the earnest eyes. He was old now—sixty, I dare say; tall, slender, and very upright still; his white hair brushed back from his forehead and worn rather long. What his original condition of life might have been did not transpire; he never talked of it. More than once I had seen him reading Latin books; and though he fell into the diction of the country people around when talking with them, he changed his tones and language when conversing with his betters. A character, no doubt, he was, but a man to be respected; a man of religion, too—attending church regularly twice on a Sunday, wet or dry, and carrying his religion into the little things of every-day life.

His style of dress was old-fashioned and

peculiar. So far as I saw, it never varied. A stout coat, waistcoat, and breeches every day, all of one colour—drab; with leather gaiters buttoned nearly to the knee. On Sundays he wore a suit of black silk velvet, and a frilled shirt of fine cambric. His breeches were tied at the knee with black ribbon, in which was a plain, shining steel buckle; buckles to match shone in his shoes. His stockings were black, and in the winter he wore black cloth gaiters. In short, on Sundays Abel Crew looked like a fine old-fashioned English gentleman, and would have been taken for one. The woman who did up his linen declared he was more particular over his shirt-frills than Sir Peter himself.

Strangers in the place would sometimes ask what he was. The answer was not easy to give. He was a botanist and herbalist, and made pills, and mixtures, and perfumes, and sold honey, and had built his cottage and planted out his garden, and lived alone, cooking his food and waiting on himself; doing all in fact with his own hands, and was very modest always. On the other side, he had travelled in his youth, he understood paintings, studied the stars, read his store of Latin and classical books, and now and then bought more, and was as good a doctor as Duffham himself. Some people said a better one. Certain it was, that more than once when legitimate medical nostrums had failed—calomel and blisters and

bleeding—Abel Crew's simple decoctions and leaves had worked a cure. Look at young Mrs. Sterling at the Court. When that first baby of hers came to town—and a fine squalling young brat he was, with a mouth like a crocodile's!—gatherings arose in her chest or somewhere, one after another; it was said the agony was awful. Duffham's skill seemed to have gone a blackberrying, the other doctor's also, for neither of the two could do anything for her, and the Court thought she would have died of it. Upon that, some relation of old Sterling's was summoned from London—a great physician in great practice. He came in answer, and was liberal with his advice, telling them to try this and to try the other. But it did no good; and she only got worse. When they were all in despair, seeing her increased weakness and the prolonged pain, the woman who nursed her spoke of old Abel Crew; she had known him cure in these cases when the doctor could not: and the poor young lady, willing to catch at a straw, told them to go for Abel Crew. Abel Crew took a prepared plaster of herbs with him, green leaves of some kind, and applied it. That night the patient slept more easily than she had for weeks; and in a short time was well.

But, skilful though he seemed to be in the science of herbs, as remedies for sickness and sores, Abel Crew never obtruded himself upon the ailing, or took money for his advice, or

willingly interfered with the province of Duffham; he never would do it unless compelled in the interests of humanity. The patients he chiefly treated were the poor, those who could not have paid Duffham a coin worth thinking of. Duffham knew this. And, instead of being jealous of him, as some medical men might have been, or ridiculing him for a quack, Duffham liked and respected old Abel Crew. He was simple in his habits still: living chiefly upon bread-and-butter, with radishes or mustard-and-cress for a relish, cooking vegetables for his dinner, but rarely meat: and his drink was tea or spring water.

So that Abel Crew was rather a notable character amid us; and when it was known abroad that two of his pills had caused the death of Mrs. Reed's twins, there arose no end of a commotion.

It chanced that the same night this occurred, just about the time in fact that the unfortunate infants were taking down the pills under the superintendence of their mother and the blacksmith's wife, Abel Crew met with an accident; though it was curious enough that it should be so. In taking a pan of boiling herbs off the fire, he let one of the handles slip out of his fingers; it sent the pan down on that side, spilled a lot of the stuff, and scalded his left foot on the instep. Therefore he was about the last person to hear of the calamity; for his

door was not open as usual the following morning, and nobody knocked to tell him of it.

Duffham was the first. Passing by on his morning rounds, the doctor heard the comments of the people, and it arrested him. It was so unusual a thing for Abel Crew not to be about, and for his door to be closed, that some of them had been arriving at a sensible conclusion—Abel Crew, knowing the mischief his pills had done, was shutting himself up within the house, unable to face his neighbours.

"Rubbish!" said Duffham. And he strode up the garden-path, knocked at the door with his cane, and entered. Abel had dressed, but was lying down on the bed again to rest his lame foot.

Duffham would have asked to look at it, but that he knew Abel Crew was as good at burns and scalds as he himself was. It had been doctored at once, and was now wrapped up in a handkerchief.

"The fire is nearly out," said Abel, "but it must have rest; by to-night I shall be able to dress it with my healing salve. I am much obliged to you for coming in, sir: though in truth I don't know how you could have heard of the accident."

"Ah; news flies," said Duffham, evasively, knowing that he had not heard of the foot, or the neighbours either, and had come in

for something altogether different. "What is this about the pills?"

"About the pills?" repeated Abel Crew, who had got up out of respect, and was putting on his coat. "What pills, sir?"

The doctor told him what had happened. Hester Reed had given one of his pills to each of her babies, and both had died of it. Abel Crew listened quietly; his face and his eyes fixed on Duffham.

"The children cannot have died of the pills," said he, speaking as gently as you please. "Something else must have killed them."

"According to Hester Reed's account, nothing can have done it but the pills," said Duffham. "The children had only taken their ordinary food throughout the day, and very little of that. George Reed came running to me in the night, but it was too late; one was dead before I got there. There could be no mistaking the children's symptoms—that they were poisoned."

"This is very strange," exclaimed Abel, looking troubled. "By what kind of poison?"

"Arsenic, I think. I——"

But here they were interrupted. Dovey the blacksmith, hearing of the calamity, together with the fact that it was his wife who had assisted to administer the suspected doses, deemed it his duty to look into the affair a little, *and to resent* it. He had left his forge and a

bar of iron reeking hot in it, and come tearing along in his leather apron, his shirt-sleeves stripped up to the elbow, and his arms grimy. A dark-eyed, good-natured little man in general, was Dovey, but exploding with rage at the present moment.

"Now then, Abel Crew, what do you mean by selling pills to poison people?" demanded he, pushing back the door with a bang, and stepping in fiercely. Duffham, foreseeing there was going to be a contest, and having no time to waste, took his departure.

"I have not sold pills to poison people," replied Abel.

"Look here," said Dovey, folding his black arms, "be you a-going to eat them pills, or be you not? Come!"

"What do you mean, Dovey!"

"What do I mean! Ain't my meaning plain? Do you own to having selled a box of pills to Hester Reed last winter?—be you a thinking to eat that there fact, and deny of it? Come, Abel Crew?"

"I remember it well," readily spoke up Abel. "Mrs. Reed came here one day, complaining that her head ached continually, and her side often had a dull pain in it, and asked me to give her something. I did; I gave her a box of pills. It was early in January, I think. I know there was ice on the ground."

"Then you do *own* to them pills," returned

Dovey, more quietly, his fierceness subdued by Abel's civility. "It were you that furnished 'em?"

"I furnished the box of pills I speak of, that Hester Reed had from me in the winter. There's no mistake about that."

"And made 'em too?"

"Yes, and made them."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say that there; and now don't you go for to eat your words later, Abel Crew. Our Ann, my wife, helped to give them there two pills to the children; and I'm not a-going to let her get into trouble over it. You've confessed to the pills, and I be a witness."

"My pills did not kill the children, Dovey," said Abel in a pleasant tone, putting his lame foot up on an opposite chair.

"Not kill 'em?"

"No, that they did not. I've not made pills all these years to poison children at last."

"But what done it if the pills didn't?"

"How can I say? 'Twasn't my pills."

"Dr. Duffham says it was the pills. And he——"

"Dr. Duffham says it was?"

"Reed telled me that the doctor asked outright, all in a flurry, what his wife had gave the babies, and she said she had gave 'em nothing but them there two pills of Abel Crew's. *Duffham* said the pills must have had poison in

'em, and he asked for the box; and Hester Reed, she give him the box, and he sealed it up afore their eyes with his own seal."

Abel nodded. He knew that any suspected medicine must in such a case be sealed up.

"And now that I've got that there word from ye, I'll say good-day to ye, neighbour, for I've left my forge to itself, and some iron red-hot in it. And I hope with all my heart and mind,"—the blacksmith turned round from the door to say more kindly, his good-nature cropping up again,—"that it'll turn out it *warn't* the pills, but some'at else: our Ann won't have no cause to be in a fright then."

Which was as much as to say that Ann Dovey was in a fright, you observe.

That same afternoon, going past the common, I saw Abel Crew in his garden, sitting back against the cottage wall in the sun, his foot resting on a block of wood.

"How did it all happen, Abel?" I asked, turning in at the gate. "Did you give Mrs. Reed the wrong pills?"

"No, sir," he answered, "I gave her the right pills; the pills I make expressly for such complaints as hers. But if I had, in one sense, given her the wrong, they could not have brought about any ill effect such as this, for my pills are all innocent of poison."

"I should say it could not have been the pills that did the *mischief,* after all, then."

"You might swear it as well, Master Johnny, with perfect safety. What killed the poor children, I don't pretend to know, but my pills never did. I tried to get down as far as Reed's to inquire particulars, and found I could not walk. 'Twas a bit of ill-luck, the disabling myself just at this time."

"Shall you have to appear at the inquest to-morrow?"

He lifted his head quickly at the question—as though it surprised him. Perhaps not having cast his thoughts that way.

"Is there to be an inquest, Master Johnny?"

"I heard so from old Jones. He has gone over to see the coroner?"

"Well, I wish the investigation was all over and done with," said he. "It makes me uneasy, though I know I am innocent."

Looking at him sitting there in the glistening sun, at his beautiful face with its truthful eyes and its silver hair, it was next to impossible to believe he could be the author of the two children's death. Only—the best of us are liable to mistakes, and sometimes make them. I said as much.

"*I* made none, Master Johnny," was his answer. "When my pills come to be analysed—as of course they must be—they will be found pure and innocent."

The inquest did not take place till the Friday.

Old Jones had fixed it for the Thursday, but the coroner put it off to the next day. And by the time Friday morning dawned, opinion had veered round, and was strongly in favour of Abel Crew. All the parish had been to see him; and his protestations, that he had never in his life put any kind of poison in his medicines, made a great impression. The pills could not have been in fault, said everybody. Dr. Duffham might have sealed them up as a matter of precaution, but the mischief would not be found there.

In the middle of Church Dykely, next door to Perkins the butcher's, stood the Silver Bear Inn; a better sort of public-house, kept by Henry Rimmer. It was there that the inquest was held. Henry Rimmer himself and Perkins the butcher were two of the jurymen. Dobbs the blacksmith was another. They all dressed themselves in their Sunday-going clothes to attend it. It was called for two in the afternoon; and soon after that hour, the county coroner (who had dashed up to the Silver Bear in a fast gig, his clerk driving) and the jury trooped down to George Reed's cottage and took a look at the two pale little faces lying there side by side. Then they went back again, and the proceedings began.

Of course as many spectators went crowding into the room as it would hold. Three or four chairs were there (*besides* those occupied by

the jury at the table), and a bench stood against the wall. The bench was speedily fought for and filled; but Henry Rimmer's brother, constituting himself master of the ceremonies, reserved the chairs for what he called the "big people," meaning those of account in the place. The Squire was bowed into one; and to my surprise I got another. Why, I could not imagine, unless it was that they remembered I was the owner of George Reed's cottage. But I did not like to sit when so many older persons were standing, and I would not take the chair.

Some little time was occupied with preliminaries before what might be called the thick of the inquest set in. First of all, the coroner went into a passion because Abel Crew had not put in an appearance, asking old Jones if he supposed that was the way justice must be administered in England, and that he ought to have had Crew present. Old Jones, who was in a regular fluster with it all, and his legs more gouty than ever, told the coroner, calling him "his worship," that he had understood Crew meant to be present. Upon which the coroner sharply answered that "understanding" went for nought, and Jones should know his business better.

However, in walked Abel Crew in the midst of the contest. His delayed arrival was caused by his difficulty in getting his damaged foot *there*; which had been accomplished by the

help of a stick and somebody's arm. Abel had dressed himself in his black velvet suit; and as he took off his hat on entering and bowed respectfully to the coroner, I declare he could not be taken for anything but a courtly gentleman of the old school. Nobody offered him a chair. I wished I had not given up mine: he should have had it.

Evidence was first tendered of the death of the children, and of the terrible pain they had died in. Duffham and a medical man, who was a stranger and had helped at the post-mortem, testified to arsenic being the cause of death. The next question was, how had it got administered. A rumour arose in the room that the pills had been analysed; but the result had not transpired. Everybody could see a small paper parcel standing on the table before the coroner, and knew by its shape that it must contain the pill-box.

Hester Reed was called. She said (giving her evidence very quietly, just a sobbing sigh every now and then alone betraying what she felt) that she was the wife of George Reed. Her two little ones—twins, aged eleven months and a half—had been ailing for a day or two, seemed feverish, would not eat their food, were very cross at times and unnaturally still at others, and she came to the conclusion that their teeth must be plaguing them, and thought she would give them some mild physic. Mrs.

Todhetley, the Squire's lady at Dyke Manor, had called in on the Tuesday afternoon, and agreed with her that some mild physic——"

"Confine your statement to what is evidence," interrupted the coroner, in a stern voice.

Hester Reed, looking scared at the check, and perhaps not knowing what was evidence and what not, went on the best way she could. She and Ann Dovey—who had been neighbourly enough to look in and help her—had given the children a pill apiece in the evening after they were undressed, mashing the pill up in a little sugar and warm water. She then put them to bed upstairs and went to bed herself not long after. In the night she and her husband were awoke by the babies' screams, and they thought it must be convulsions. Her husband lighted the fire and ran for Dr. Duffham; but one had died before the doctor could get there, and the other died close upon it.

"What food had you given them during the day?" asked the coroner.

"Very little indeed, sir. They wouldn't take it."

"What did the little that they did take consist of?"

"It were soaked bread, sir, with milk and some sprinkled sugar. I tried them with some potato mashed up in a spoonful o' broth at midday—we'd had a bit 'o biled neck o' mutton *for dinner*—but they both turned from it."

"Then all they took that day was bread soaked in milk and sweetened with sugar?"

"Yes, it were, sir. But the bread was soaked in warm water and the milk and sugar was put in afterwards. 'Twas but the veriest morsel they'd take, poor little dears!"

"Was the bread—and the milk—and the sugar, the same that the rest of your household used?"

"In course it were, sir. My other children ate plenty of it. *Their* appetites didn't fail 'em."

"Where did you get the warm water from that you say you soaked the bread in?"

"Out o' the tea-kettle, sir. The water was the same that I biled for our tea morning and night."

"The deceased children, then, had absolutely no food given to them apart from what you had yourselves?"

"Not a scrap, sir. Not a drop."

"Except the pills."

"Excepting of them in course, sir. None o' the rest of us wanted no physic."

"Where did you procure these pills?"

She went into the history of the pills. Giving the full account of them, as already related.

"By your own showing, witness, it must be three months, or thereabouts, since you had that box of pills from Abel Crew," spoke the coroner. "How do you know that the two pills you

administered to the deceased children came from the same box?"

Hester Reed's eyes opened in a wide stare. She looked as surprised as though she had been asked whether she got the two pills from the moon.

"Yes, yes," interposed one of the jury, "how do you know it was the same box?"

"Why, gentlemen, I had no other box of pills at all, save that," she said, when speech came to her. "We've not had no physic but that in the cottage since winter, nor for ever so long afore. I'll swear it were the same box, sirs; there can't be no mistake about it."

"Did you leave it about in the way of people?" resumed the coroner. "So that it might be handled by anybody who might come into your cottage?"

"No, sir," she answered, earnestly. "I never kept the pill-box but in one place, and that was on the top of the high press upstairs out of harm's way. I put it there the first night Abel Crew gave it me, and when I wanted to get a pill or two out for my own taking, I'd used to step on a chair—for it's too high for me to reach up without—and help myself. The box have never been took from the place at all, sir, till Tuesday night, when I brought it downstairs with me. When I've wanted to dust the press-top, I've just lifted the pill-box with one hand *and passed the* duster along under it with the

other, as I stood on the chair. It's the same box, sir; I'll swear to that much; and it's the same pills."

Strong testimony. The coroner paused a moment. "You swear that, you say? You are quite sure?"

"Sir, I am sure and positive. The box was never took from its place since Abel Crew give it me, till I reached up for it on Tuesday evening and carried it downstairs."

"You had been in the habit of taking these pills yourself, you say?"

"I took two three or four times when I first had 'em, sir, once I took three; but since then I've felt better and not wanted any."

"Did you feel any inconvenience from them? Any pain?"

"Not a bit, sir. As I said to Ann Dovey that night, when she asked whether they was fit pills to give the children, they seemed as mild as milk."

"Should you know the box again, witness?"

"Law yes, sir, what should hinder me?" returned Hester Reed, inwardly marvelling at what seemed so superfluous a question.

The coroner undid the paper, and handed the box to her. She was standing close to him, on the other side his clerk—who sat writing down the evidence. "Is this the box?" he asked. "Look at it well."

Mrs. Reed did as she was bid: turned it

about and looked "well." "Yes, sir, it is the same box," said she. "That is, I am nearly sure of it."

"What do you mean by *nearly* sure?" quickly asked the coroner, catching at the word. "Have you any doubt?"

"Not no moral doubt at all, sir. Only them pill-boxes is all so like one another. Yes, sir, I'm sure it is the same box."

"Open it, and look at the pills. Are they, in your judgment, the same?"

"Just the same, sir," she answered, after taking off the lid. "One might a'most know 'em anywhere. Only——"

"Only what?" demanded the coroner, as she paused.

"Well, sir, I fancied I had rather more left—six or seven, say. There's only five here."

The coroner made no answer to that. He took the box from her and put on the lid. We soon learnt that two had been taken out for the purpose of being analysed.

For who should loom into the room at that juncture but Pettipher, the druggist from Pie-finch Cut. He had been analysing the pills in a hasty way in obedience to orders received half-an-hour ago, and came to tell the result. The pills contained arsenic, he said; not enough to kill a grown person, he thought, but enough to kill a child. As Pettipher was only a small man (in a business point of view) and sold

groceries as well as drugs, and spectacles and ear-trumpets, some of us did not think much of his opinion, and fancied the pills should have been analysed by Duffham. That was just like old Jones: giving work to the wrong man.

George Reed was questioned, but could tell nothing, save that he had never touched either box or pills. While Ann Dovey was being called, and the coroner had his head bent over his clerk's notes, speaking to him in an undertone, Abel Crew suddenly asked to be allowed to look at the pills. The coroner, never lifting his head, just pushed the box downwards on the green cloth; and one of the jury handed it over his shoulder to Abel Crew.

"This is not the box I gave Mrs. Reed," said Abel, in a clear, firm tone, after diving into it with his eyes and nose. "Nor are these the pills."

Up went the coroner's head with a start. He had supposed the request to see the box came from a juryman. It might have been irregular for Abel Crew to be allowed so much; but as it arose partly through the coroner's own fault, he was too wise to make a clatter over it.

"What is that you say?" he asked, stretching out his hand for the box as eagerly as though it had contained gold.

"That this box and these pills are not the same that I furnished to Mrs. Reed, sir," replied Abel, advancing and placing the box in the coroner's hand. "They are not, indeed."

"Not the same pills and box!" exclaimed the coroner. "Why, man, you have heard the evidence of the witness, Hester Reed; you may see for yourself that she spoke nothing but truth. Don't talk nonsense here."

"But they are *not* the same, sir," respectfully persisted Abel. "I know my own pills, and I know my own boxes: these are neither the one nor the other."

"Now that won't do; you must take us all for fools," exploded the coroner, who was a man of quick temper. "Just you stand back and be quiet."

"Never a pill-box went out from my hands, sir, but it had my little private mark upon it," urged Abel. "That box does not bear the mark."

"What is the mark, pray?" asked the coroner.

"Four little dots of ink on the inside of the rim of the lid, sir; and four similar dots on the inside of the box near the edge. They are so faint that a casual observer might not notice them; but they are always there. Of all the pill-boxes now in my house, sir—and I suppose there may be two or three dozen of them—you will not find one but has the mark."

Some whispering had been going on in different parts of the room; but this silenced it. You might have heard a pin drop. The words seemed to make an impression on the coroner: *they* and Abel Crew were both so earnest.

"You assert also that the pills are not yours," spoke the coroner, who was known to be fond of desultory conversations while holding his inquests. "What proof have you of that?"

"No proof; that is, no proof that I can advance, tangible to the eye or ear. But I am certain, by the look of them, that those were never my pills."

All this took the jury aback; the coroner also. It had seemed to some of them an odd thing that Hester Reed should have swallowed two or three of the pills at once without their entailing an ache or a pain, and yet that one each had poisoned the babies. Perkins the butcher observed to the coroner that the box must have been changed since Mrs. Reed helped herself from it. Upon which the coroner, after pulling at his whiskers for a moment as if in thought, called out for Mrs. Reed to return.

But when she did so, and was further questioned, she only kept to what she had said before, strenuously denying that the box *could* have been changed. It had never been touched by any hands but her own while it stood in its place atop of the press, and had never been removed from it at all until she took it downstairs on the past Tuesday night.

"Is the room where this press stands your own sleeping-room?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. It's the other room, where my three children sleep."

"Could these children get to the box?"

"Dear no, sir! 'Twould be quite impossible."

"Had anyone an opportunity of handling the box when you took it downstairs on Tuesday night?" went on the coroner after a pause.

"Only Mrs. Dovey, sir. Nobody else was there."

"Did she touch it?"

"She laid hold of it to look at the pills."

"Did you leave her *alone* with it?"

"No, sir. Leastways—yes, I did for a minute or so, while I went into the back'us to get the sugar and a saucer and spoon."

"Had she the box in her hands when you returned?"

"Yes, sir, I think she had. I think she was still a-smelling at the pills. I know the poor little innocents was lying one on one knee, and one on t'other, all flat, and her two hands was lifted with the box in 'em."

"It was after that that you took the pills out of it to give the children?"

"Yes, sir; directly after. But Ann Dovey wouldn't do nothing wrong to the pills, sir."

"That will do," said the coroner in his curt way. "Call Ann Dovey."

Ann Dovey walked forward with a face as red as her new bonnet-strings. She had heard the whole colloquy: something seemed, too, to have put her out. Possessing scant veneration for *coroners* at the best of times, and none for the

jury at present assembled, she did not feel disposed to keep down her temper.

The few first questions asked her, however, afforded no opportunity for resentment, for they were put quietly, and tended only to extract confirmation of Mrs. Reed's evidence, as to the fetching the pill-box from above stairs and the administering of the pills. Then the coroner cleared his throat.

"Did you see the last witness, Hester Reed, go into the back kitchen to get a spoon and saucer?"

"I saw her go and fetch 'em from somewhere," replied Ann Dovey, who felt instinctively the ball was beginning, and gave the reins to her tongue accordingly.

"Did you take charge of the pill-box while she was gone?"

"I had it in my hand, if you mean that."

"Did anybody come into the kitchen during that interval?"

"No they didn't," was the tart response.

"You were alone, save for the two infants?"

"I were. What of it?"

"Now, witness, did you do anything with that box? Did you, for instance, exchange it for another?"

"I think you ought to be ashamed o' yourselves, all on you, to sit and ask a body such a thing!" exploded Mrs. Dovey, growing more resentful, at being questioned, with every

moment. "If I had knowed the bother that was to spring up, I'd have chucked the box, pills and all, into the fire first. I wish I had!"

"Was the box, that you handed to Hester Reed on her return, the same box she left with you? Were the pills the same pills?"

"Why, where d'ye think I could have got another box from?" asked she in a shrieking tone. "D'ye suppose, sir, I carry boxes and pills about with me? I bain't so fond o' physic as all that comes to."

"Dovey takes pills on occasion for that giddiness he gets; I've seen him take 'em; mayhap ye'd picked up a box of his," spoke Dobbs the blacksmith, mildly.

That was adding fuel to fire. Two of a trade don't agree. Dovey and Dobbs were both blacksmiths: the one in Church Dykely, the other in Piefinch Cut, not much more, so to say, than a stone's throw from one another. The men were good friends enough; but their respective ladies were apt to regard jealously all work taken to the rival establishment. Any other of the jurymen might have made the remark with comparative impunity; not so Dobbs. And, besides the turn the inquiry seemed to be taking, Mrs. Dovey had not been easy about it in her mind from the first; proof of which was furnished by the call, already told of, made by her husband on Abel Crew.

"Dovey takes pills on occasion, do he!" she

shrilly retorted. "And what do you take, Bill Dobbs? Pints o' beer when you can get 'em. Who lamed Poole's white horse the t'other day a shoeing of him?"

"Silence!" sternly interrupted the coroner. While Dobbs, conscious of the self-importance imparted to him by the post he was now filling, and of the necessity of maintaining the dignity of demeanour which he was apt to put on with his best clothes, bore the aspersion with equanimity and a stolid face.

"Attend to me, witness, and confine yourself to replying to the questions I put," continued the coroner. "Did you take with you any pills or pill-box of your own when you went to Mrs. Reed's that evening?"

"No I *didn't*," returned Ann Dovey, the emphasis culminating in a sob: and why she should have set on to shiver and shake was more than the jury could understand.

"Do you wear pockets?"

"What if I do?" she said, after a momentary pause. But her lips took a white shade, and I thought she was trying to brave it out.

"Had you a pocket on that evening?"

"Heaven be good to me!" I heard her mutter under her breath. And if ever I saw a woman look frightened nearly to death, Ann Dovey looked it then.

"Had you a pocket on that evening, witness?" repeated the coroner, sharply.

"Y—es."

"What articles were in it? Do you recollect? Come!"

"It were a key or two," came the answer at length, her very teeth chattering and all the impudence suddenly gone out of her. "And my thimble, sir;—and some coppers;—and a part of a nutmeg;—and—and I don't remember nothing else, sir."

"No box of pills? You are sure you had not that?"

"Haven't I said so, sir?" she rejoined, bursting into a frantic flood of tears. For which, and for the sudden agitation, nobody could see any reason: and perhaps it was only that which made the coroner harp upon the same string. Her demeanour had become suspicious.

"You had no poison of any kind in your pocket, then?"

But he asked the question in jest more than earnest. For when she went into hysterics instead of replying, he let her go. He was used to see witnesses scared at being brought before him.

The verdict was not arrived at that day. When other witnesses had been examined, the coroner addressed the jury. Ten of them listened deferentially, and were quite prepared to return a verdict of Manslaughter against Abel Crew: seemed red-hot to do it, in fact. *But two* of them dissented. They were not

satisfied, they said; and they held out for adjourning the inquest to see if any more light could be thrown upon the affair. As they evidently had the sense of the room with them, the coroner yielded, and adjourned the inquest in a temper.

And then it was discovered that the name was not Crew but Carew. Abel himself corrected the coroner. Upon that, the corner sharply demanded why it was that he had lived under a false name.

"Nay, sir," replied Abel, as dignified as you please, "I have not had any intention of doing so. When I first came to this neighbourhood I gave my name correctly—Carew: but the people at once converted it into Crew by their mode of pronunciation."

"At any rate, you must have sanctioned it."

"Tacitly I have. What did it signify? When I have had occasion to write my name—but that has been very rare—I have written it Carew. Old Sir Peter Chavasse knew it was Carew, and used to call me so; as did Sir Geoffry. Indeed, sir, I have had no reason to conceal my name."

"That's enough," said the corner, cutting him short. "Stand back, Abel Carew. The proceedings are adjourned to this day week."

IV.

ABEL CREW.

THINGS are done in remote country places that would not be done in towns. Whether the law is understood by us, or whether it is not, it often happens that it is very much exceeded, or otherwise not acted upon. Those who have to exercise it sometimes show themselves as ignorant as if they had lived all their lives in the wilds of America.

Old Jones the constable was one of these. When not checked by his masters, the magistrates, he would do most outrageous things—speaking of legality and common sense. And he did one in reference to Abel Crew. I still say Crew. Though it had come out that his name was Carew, we should be sure to call him Crew to the end.

The inquest might have been concluded at its first sitting, but for the two malcontents amid the jury. Perkins the butcher and Dobbs the blacksmith. Truth to say, these two had plenty of intelligence; which could not be said of

all the rest. Ten of the jury pronounced the case to be as clear as daylight: the infants had been poisoned by Abel Crew's pills: and the coroner seemed to agree with them—he hated trouble. But Dobbs and Perkins held out. They were not satisfied, they said; the pills furnished by Abel Crew might not have been the pills that were taken by the children; moreover, they considered that the pills should be "more officially" analysed. Pettipher the druggist was all very well in his small way, but hardly up, in their opinion, to pronouncing upon pills when a man's life or liberty was at stake. They pressed for an adjournment, that the pills might be examined by some competent authority. The coroner, as good as telling them they were fools to their faces, had adjourned the inquest in suppressed passion to that day week.

"And I've got to take care of you, Abel Crew," said old Jones, floundering up on his gouty legs to Abel as the jury and crowd dispersed. "You've got to come along o' me."

"To come where?" asked Abel, who was hobbling towards home on his scalded foot, by the help of his stick and the arm of Gibbon the gamekeeper."

"To the lock-up," said old Jones.

"To the lock-up!" echoed Abel Crew.

"In course," returned old Jones. "Where else but the lock-up? Did you think it was to the pound?"

Abel Crew, lifting the hand that held his stick to brush a speck of dirt off his handsome velvet coat, turned to the constable; his nice face, a little paler than usual, gazing inquiringly at old Jones's, his silver hair shining in the setting sun.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Jones," he said calmly. "You cannot mean to lock me up?"

"Well I never!" cried old Jones, "who had a knack of considering every suspected person guilty, and treating them accordingly. "You have got a cheek, you have, Abel Crew! 'Not a-going to take me to the lock-up, Mr. Jones,' says you! Where 'ould you be took to? Come!"

"But there's no necessity for it," said Abel. "I shall not run away. I shall be in my house if I'm wanted again."

"I dare say you would!" said old Jones, ironically. "You might or you mightn't, you know. You be as good as committed for the killing and slaying o' them there two twins, and it's my business to see as you *don't* make your escape aforehand, Abel Crew."

Quite a company of us, sauntering out of the inquest-room, were listening by this time. I gave old Jones a bit of my mind.

"He is not yet committed, Jones, therefore you have no right to take him or to lock him up."

"You don't know nothing about it, Mr. Ludlow. I do. The crowner gave me a hint, and

I'm acting on it. 'Don't you go and let that man escape,' says his worship to me: 'it'll be at your peril if you do.' '*I'll* see to him, your worship,' says I. And I be a-doing of it."

But it was hardly likely that the coroner meant Abel Crew to be confined in that precious lock-up for a whole week. One night there was bad enough. At least, I did not think he meant it; but the crowd, to judge by their comments, seemed divided on the point.

"The shortest way to settle the question will be to ask the coroner, old Jones," said I, turning back to the Silver Lion. "Come along."

"You'd be clever to catch him, Master Johnny," roared out old Jones after me. "His worship jumped into his gig; it was a-waiting for him when he come out; and his clerk drûv him off at a slapping pace."

It was true. The coroner was gone; and old Jones had it all his own way; for, you see, none of us liked to interfere with the edict of an official gentleman who held sway in the county and sat on dead people. Abel Crew accepted the alternative meekly.

"Any way, you must allow me to go home first to lock my house up, and to see to one or two other little matters," said he.

"Not unless you goes under my own eyes," retorted old Jones. "You might be for destroying of your stock o' pills for fear they should bear evidence again' you, Abel Crew."

"My pills are, of all things, what I would not destroy." said Abel. "They would bear testimony for me, instead of against me, for they are harmless."

So Abel Crew hobbled to his cottage on the common, attended by old Jones and a long tail of followers. Arrived there, he attended the first thing to his scalded foot, dressing it with some of his own ointment. Then he secured some bread-and-butter, not knowing what the accommodation at the lock-up might be in the shape of eatables, and changed his handsome quaint suit of clothes for those he wore every day. After that, he was escorted back to the lock-up.

Now, the lock-up was in Piefinch Cut, nearly opposite to Dovey the blacksmith's. The Squire remembered the time when the lock-up stood alone; when Piefinch Cut had no more houses in it than Piefinch Lane now has; but since then Piefinch Cut had been built upon and inhabited; houses touching even the sacred walls of the lock-up. A tape-and-cotton and sweetstuff shop flanked it on one side, and a small pork-butcher's on the other. Pettipher's druggist's shop, should anybody be curious on the point, was next to the tape-and-cotton mart.

To see Abel Crew arrive in the custody of old Jones the constable, and the excited tail of stragglers after them, astonished Piefinch Cut *not a little.* Figg the pawnbroker—who was

originally from Alcester—considered himself learned in the law. Any way, he was a great talker, and liked to give his opinion upon every topic that might turn up. His shop joined Dovey's forge: and when we got up there, Figg was outside, holding forth to Dovey, who had his shirt-sleeves rolled up above his elbows as usual, and his leather apron on. Mrs. Dovey stood listening behind, in the smart gown and red-ribboned bonnet she had worn at the inquest.

"Why—what on earth!—have they been and gone and took up Crew?" cried Figg in his surprise.

"It is an awful shame of old Jones," I broke in; speaking more to Dovey than Figg, for Figg was no favourite of mine. "A whole week of the lock-up! Only think of it, Dovey!"

"But have they brought it in again' him, Master Johnny?" cried Dovey, unfolding his grimy arms to touch his paper cap to me as he spoke.

"*No*; that's what they have not done. The inquest is adjourned for a week; and I don't believe old Jones has a right to take him at all. Not in law, you know."

"That's just what her brought word," said Dovey, with a nod backward to indicate his wife. "'Well, how be it turned, Ann?' says I to her when her come back—for I'd got a sight o' work in to-day and couldn't go myself. 'Oh, it haven't turned no ways yet, Jack,' says her;

'it be put off to next week.' There he goes! right in."

This last remark applied to Abel Crew. After fumbling in his pocket for the two big keys, tied together by string, and then fumbling at the latch, old Jones succeeded in opening the door. Not being used much, the lock was apt to grow rusty. Then he stood back, and with a flourish of hands motioned Abel in. He made no resistance.

"They must know for certain as 'twere his pills what done it," struck in Mrs. Dovey.

"No, they don't," said I. "What's more, I do not think it was his pills. Abel Crew says he never put poison in his pills yet, and I believe him."

"Well, and no more it don't stand to reason as he would, Mr. Ludlow," said Figg, a man whose self-complaisance was not to be put down by any amount of discouragement. "I were just a-saying so to Dovey.——Why have old Jones took him up?" went on Figg to Gibbon the gamekeeper, who came striding by.

"Jones says he has the coroner's orders for it," answered Gibbon.

"Look here, I know a bit about law, and I know a man oughtn't to be shut up till some charge is brought again' him," contended Figg. "Crew's pills is suspected, but he have not been charged yet."

"Any way, it's what Jones has gone and

done," said Gibbon. "Perhaps he is right. And a week's not much; it'll soon pass. But as to any pills of Abel Crew's having killed them children, it's just preposterous to think of it."

"What d'ye suppose did kill 'em, then, Richard Gibbon?" demanded Ann Dovey, a hot flush on her face, her tone resentful.

"That's just what has to be found out," returned Gibbon, passing on his way.

"If it hadn't been for that there Dobbs and Butcher Perkins a-holding out again' it, Crew 'ud ha' been brought in guilty safe enough," said Ann Dovey. And the tone was again so excited, so bitterly resentful against Dobbs and Perkins, that I could not help looking at her in wonder. It sounded just as though the non-committal of Abel were a wrong inflicted on herself.

"No, he would not have been brought in guilty," I answered her; "he would have been committed for trial; but that's a different thing. If the matter could be sifted to the bottom, I know it would be found that the mischief did not lie with Abel Crew's pills. There, Mrs. Dovey."

She was looking at me out of the corners of her eyes—for all the world as if she were afraid of me, or of what I said. I could not make her out.

"Why should *you* wish so particularly to

bring it home to Crew?" I pointedly asked her; and Figg turned round to look at her, as if seconding the question.

"Me want particular to bring it home to Crew!" she retorted, her voice rising to a shriek with temper; or perhaps fear, for she trembled like an aspen leaf. "I don't want to bring it home particular to him, Mr. Ludlow. 'Twere his pills, though, all the same, what done it."

And with that she whisked through the forge to her kitchen.

On the morning following I got old Jones to let me into the lock-up. The place consisted of two rooms opening into one another, and a small square space, no bigger than a closet, at the end of the passage, where they kept the pen and ink. For that small space had a window in it, looking to the fields at the back; the two rooms had only skylights in the roof. In the inner room a narrow iron bedstead stood against the wall, a mattress and blanket on it. Abel was sitting on that when we went in.

"You must have been lively here last night, Abel!"

"Yes, very, sir," answered he, with a half smile. "I did not really mind it; I am used to be alone. I could have done with fewer rats, though."

"Oh, are there rats here?"

"Lots of them, Master Johnny. I don't like rats: nasty things! They came upon my face, and all about me."

"Why does old Jones not set traps for them? He considers this place to be under his special protection."

"There are too many for any trap to catch," answered Abel.

Old Jones had gone off to the desk in the closet, having put some bread and butter and milk on the shelf for Abel. His errand there was to enter the cost of the bread in the account-book, to be settled for later. A prisoner in the lock-up was commonly treated to bread and water: old Jones had graciously allowed this one to pay for some butter and milk from his own pocket.

"I don't want never to treat 'em harsher nor I be obliged, Master Ludlow," he said to me, when coming in, in reference to the paper of butter and the jug of milk he was carrying. "Abel Crew have been known as a decent man ever since he come among us: and if he chooses to pay for the butter and the milk, there ain't no law again' his having 'em. 'Tain't as if he was a burglar."

"No, he is not a burglar," I answered. "And you must mind that you do not get into the wrong box about him. There's neither law nor justice in locking him up, Jones, before he is charged."

"If I had never locked up nobody till they was charged, I should ha' been in the wrong box many a time afore now," said old Jones, doggedly. "Look at that there man last Christmas; what I caught prowling in the grounds at Parrifer Hall, with a whole set of house-breaking things concealed in his pockets! After I'd took him, and lodged him in here safe, it was found that he was one o' the worst characters in the county, only let out o' Worcester gaol two days afore. Suppose I'd not took him, Master Johnny?—where 'ud the spoons at Parrifer Hall ha' been?"

"That was a different case altogether."

"*I* know what I'm about," returned Jones. "The coroner, he just give me a nod or two, looking at Crew as he give it. I knew what it meant, sir: a nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse."

Any way, Jones had got him, here in the lock-up; and had gone off to enter the loaf of bread in the account-book; and I was sitting on the bench opposite Abel.

"It is a wicked shame of them to have put you here, Abel."

"It is not right in law—as I believe," he answered. "And I am sure it is not in justice, sir. I swear those pills and that box, produced at the inquest, were none of mine. They never went out of my hands. Old Jones thinks he is *doing right* to secure me, I suppose, and he is

civil over it; so I must not grumble. He brought me some water to wash in this morning, and a comb."

"But there's no *sense* in it. You would not attempt to escape; you would wait for the reassembling of the inquest."

"Escape!" he exclaimed. "I should be the first to stay for it. I am more anxious than anyone to have the matter investigated. Truth to say, Master Johnny, my curiosity is excited. Hester Reed is so persistently sure in regard to their being the same pills and box that I gave her; and as she is a truthful, honest woman, one can't see where the mistake lies. There must be a mystery in it somewhere."

"Suppose you are committed to take your trial? And found guilty?"

"That I shall be committed, I look upon as certain," he answered. "As to being found guilty—if I am, I must bear it. God knows my innocence, and I shall hope that in time He will bring it to light."

"All the same, Abel, they ought not to put you in here."

"That's true, sir."

"And then there will be the lying in prison until the Assizes—two or three good months to come! Don't you go and die of it, Abel."

"No, I shall not do that," he answered, smiling a little. "The consciousness of my innocence will keep me up."

I sat looking at him. What light could get in through the dusty skylight fell on his silver hair, smooth as usual, thanks to the comb, and falling back from his pale face. He held his head down in thought, only raising it to answer me. Some movement in the closet betokened old Jones's speedy approach, and I hastened to assure Abel that all sensible people would not doubt his innocence.

"Nobody need doubt it, Master Johnny," he answered firmly, his eye kindling. "I never had a grain of arsenic in my house; I have never had any other poison. There are herbs from which poison may be distilled, but I have never gathered them. When it comes to people requiring poison—and there are some diseases of the human frame that it may be good for—they should go to a qualified medical man, not to a herbalist. No. I have never, never had poison or poisonous herbs within my dwelling; therefore (putting other reasons aside) it is *impossible* that those poisonous pills can be my pills. God hears me say it, and knows that it is true."

Old Jones, balancing the keys in his hand and himself on his fat and gouty legs, cased in their white ribbed stockings, was standing within the room, listening. Abel Crew was so respectable and courteous a prisoner, compared with those he generally had in the lock-up, burglars, *tipsy* men, and the like, returning him a "thank

you" instead of an oath, that he had already begun to regard him with some favour, and the assertion seemed to make an impression on him.

"Look here," said he. "Whose pills could they have been, if they warn't your'n?"

"I cannot imagine," returned Abel Crew. "I am as curious about it as anybody else—Master Ludlow here knows I am. I dare say it will come out sometime. They *could not* have been made up by me."

"What was that you told the coroner about your pill-boxes being marked?" asked old Jones.

"And so they are marked; all of them. The pill-box I saw there——"

"I mean the stock o' boxes you've got at home. Be them all marked?"

"Every one of them. When I get in a fresh lot of pill-boxes the first thing I do, on bringing them home, is to mark them."

"Then look here. You just trust me with the key of your place, and tell me where the boxes is to be found, and I'll go and secure 'em and lay 'em afore the coroner. If they be all found marked, it'll tell in your favour."

The advice sounded good, and Abel Crew handed over his key. Jones looked solemn as he and I went away together.

"It's an odd thing, though, Master Johnny, ain't it, how the pison could ha' got into them

there pills," said he slowly, as he put the big key into the lock of the outer door.

And we had an audience round us before the words were well spoken. To see the lock-up made fast when there was a prisoner inside it, was always a coveted recreation in Piefinch Cut. Several individuals had come running up; not to speak of children from the gutters. Dovey stood gazing in front of his forge; Figg, who liked to be lounging about outside when he had no customers transacting delicate negotiations within, put his back against his shop-window, and stared in concert with Dovey. Jones, flourishing the two formidable keys, crossed over to them.

"How do he feel to-day?" asked Figg, nodding towards the lock-up.

"He don't feel no worse appariently nor he do other days," replied old Jones. "It be a regular odd thing, it be."

"What be odd?" asked Dovey.

"How the pison could ha' got into them there pills. Crew says he has never had no pison in his place o' no kind, herbs nor else."

"And I would pledge my word that it is the truth," I put in.

"Well, and so I think it is," said Dovey. "Last night George Reed was in here, a-talking. He says he one day come across Abel Crew looking for herbs in the copse behind the Grange. Crew was picking and choosing:

some herbs he'd leave alone, and some he dug up. Reed spied out a fine-looking plant, and called to him. Up comes Crew, trowel in hand, bends down to take a look, and then gives his head a shake. 'That won't do for me,' says he, 'that plant has poisonous properties,' says he; 'and I never meddles with them what has,' says he. George Reed told us that much in this here forge last night. Him and his wife have a'most had words about it."

"Had words about what?" asked old Jones.

"Why about them there pills. Reed tells her that if it is the pills what poisoned the young ones, she have made some mull o' the box Abel give her and got it changed. But he don't believe as 'twere the pills at all. And Hester Reed, she sticks to it that she never made no mull o' the box, and that the pills is the same."

At this juncture, happening to turn my head, I saw Mrs. Dovey at the door at the back of the forge. Her body was in the kitchen, her face was screwed round the doorpost, listening; and there was a great fear on it. Seeing me looking at her, she disappeared like a shot, and quietly closed the door. A thought flashed into me.

"That woman knows more about it than she will say! And it is frightening her. What can the mystery be?"

The children were buried on the Sunday

afternoon, all the parish flocking to the funeral; and the next morning Abel Crew was released. Whether old Jones took a qualm as to the legality of what he had done, or whether he got a mandate from the coroner by the early post, nobody knew. Certain it was, that before nine o'clock old Jones held the lock-up doors open, and Abel Crew walked out. It was thought that some one must have written privately to the coroner—which was more than likely. Old Jones was down in the mouth all day, as if he had had an official blowing up.

Abel and his stick went home. The perfect rest and his own doctoring had nearly cured the instep. On the Saturday old Jones had made a descent upon the cottage and cleared it of the pill-boxes. Jones found that every box had Abel's private mark upon it.

"Well, this is a curious start, Crew!" exclaimed Mr. Duffham, meeting him as he was turning in at his gate. "Now in the lock-up, and now out of it! It may be old Jones's notion of law, but it is not mine. How have you enjoyed it?"

"It would not have been so bad but for the rats, sir," replied Abel. "I could see a few stars shining through the skylight."

The days went on to the Thursday, and it was now the evening before the adjourned *in*quest. Tod and I, in consideration of the

popular ferment, had taken the Squire at a favourable moment, and extracted from him another week's holiday. Opinions were divided: some believed in Crew, others in the poisoned pills. As to Crew himself, he was out in his garden as usual, attending to his bees, and his herbs and flowers, and quietly awaiting the good or the ill luck that Fate might be holding in store for him.

It was Thursday evening, I say; and I was taking tea with Duffham. Having looked in upon him, when rushing about the place, he asked me to stay. The conversation turned upon the all-engrossing topic; and I chanced to mention that the behaviour of Ann Dovey puzzled me. Upon that, Duffham said that it was puzzling him. He had been called in to her the previous day, and found her in a regular fever, eyes anxious, breath hysterical, face hectic. Since the day of the inquest she had been in this state, and the blacksmith told Duffham he could not make out what had come to her. "Them pills have druv her mad, sir," were Dovey's words; "she can't get 'em off her mind."

The last cup of tea was poured out, and Duffham was shaking round the old black pot to see if he could squeeze out more, when we had an interruption. Dovey came bursting in upon us straight from his forge; his black hair all ruffled, and his small dark face hot with

flurry. It was a singular tale he had come to tell. His wife had been making a confession to him. Driven pretty nearly out of her mind by the weight of a secret, she could hold it no longer.

To begin at the beginning. Dovey's house swarmed with black beetles. Dovey himself did not mind the animals, but Mrs. Dovey did; and no wonder, when she could not step out of bed in the night without putting her foot on some. But, if Dovey did not dislike black-beetles, there was another thing he did dislike—hated in fact; and that was the stuff called beetle-powder: which professed to kill them. Mrs. Dovey would have scattered some on the floor every night; but Dovey would not allow it. He forbid her to bring a grain of it into the house: it was nothing but poison, he said, and might chance to kill themselves as well as the beetles. Ann Dovey had her way in most matters, for Dovey was easy, as men and husbands go; but when once he put his veto on a thing, she knew she might as well try to turn the house round as turn him.

Now what did Ann Dovey do? On that very Easter Tuesday, as it chanced, as soon as dusk set in, off she went to Dame Chad's general shop in Church Dykely, where the beetle-powder was sold, and bought a packet of it. It seemed to her, that of the choice between *two* evils—to put up with the horrible black

animals, or to disobey Dovey, the latter was the more agreeable. She could easily shake some of the powder down lightly of a night; the beetles—or, as she always pronounced it, beedles—would eat it up before morning, and Dovey would never know it. Accordingly, paying for the powder—a square packet, done up in blue paper, on which was labelled "Poison" in as large letters as the printer could get into the space—she thrust it into the depths of her gown pocket—it was her holiday gown—and set off home again. Calling in at George Reed's cottage on her way, she there assisted, as it also chanced, at the administering of the pills to the unfortunate children. And perhaps her motive for calling in was not so much from a love of presiding at physic-giving, as that she might be able, when she got home, to say "At Reed's," if her husband asked her where she had been. It fell out as she thought. No sooner had she put foot inside the forge than Dovey began, "Where'st been, Ann;" and she told him at Reed's, helping with the sick little ones. Dovey's work was over for the night; he wanted his supper; and she had no opportunity of using the beetle-powder. It was left untouched in the pocket of her gown. The following morning came the astounding news of the children's death; and in the excitement caused by that, Mrs. Dovey lost sight of the powder. Perhaps she thought that the general

stir might cause Dovey to be more wakeful than usual, and that she might as well let the powder be for a short while. It was safe where it was, in her hung-up gown. Dovey never meddled with her pockets: on or off, they were no concern of his.

But, on the Friday morning, when putting on this same holiday gown to attend the inquest, to which she had been summoned, what was her horror to find the packet burst, and her pocket filled with the loose powder. Mrs. Dovey had no greater love for beetle-powder in itself than she had for beetles, and visibly shuddered. She could not empty it out; there it had to stay; for Dovey, excited by his wife's having to give evidence, was in and out of her room like a dog in a fair; and she went off perforce with the stuff in her pocket. And when during her examination the questions took the turn they did take, and the coroner asked her whether she had had any poison in her pocket that night at George Reed's; this, with the consciousness of what had been that night in her pocket, of what was in her pocket at that very moment, then present, nearly frightened her into fits. From that hour, Ann Dovey had lived in a state of terror. It was not that she believed any of the beetle-powder *could* have got inside the ill-fated young ones (though she did not feel quite easy on the point), as that she feared the *accusation* might be shifted off Crew's shoulders

and on to hers. On this Thursday evening she could hold out no longer; and disclosed all to Dovey.

Dovey burst upon us in a heat. He was as straightforward a man as ever lived, of an intensely honest nature, and could no more have kept it in, now that he knew it, than he could have given up all righteous dealing together. His chief concern was to tell the truth, and to restore peace to his wife. He went through the narrative to Duffham without stopping; and seemed not in the least to care for my being present.

"It ain't *possible*, sir, there ain't a moral *possibility* that any o' that there dratted powder could ha' come anigh the babies," wound up Dovey. "I'd be thankful, sir, if you'd come down and quieten her a bit; her be in a fine way."

What with surprise, and what with the man's rapid speech, Duffham had not taken in the one-half of the tale. He had simply sat behind the tea-pot and stared.

"My good fellow, I don't understand," he said. "A pocketful of poison! What on earth made her take poison to George Reed's?"

So Dovey went over the heads of the story again.

"'Twere in her pocket, sir, our Ann's; it's true; but the chances is that at that time the paper

hadn't burst. None of it *couldn't* ha' got to them there two young ones."

To see the blacksmith's earnestness was good. His face was as eager, his tone as imploring as though he were pleading for his life.

"And it 'ud be a work o' charity, sir, if you'd just step down and see her. I'd pay handsome for the visit, sir; anything you please to charge. She's like one a-going right out of her mind."

"I'll come," said Duffham, who had his curiosity upon the point.

And the blacksmith set out on the run home again.

"Well, this is a curious thing!" exclaimed Duffham when he had gone.

"Could the beetle-powder have poisoned the children?" I asked.

"I don't know, Johnny. It is an odd tale altogether. We will go down and inquire into it."

Which of course implied that he expected me to go with him. Nothing loath was I; more eager than he.

Finishing what was left of the tea and bread-and-butter, we went on to Piefinch Cut. Ann Dovey was alone, save for her husband and mother. She flung herself on the sofa when she saw us—the blacksmith's house was comfortably off for furniture—and began to shriek.

"Now just you stop that, Ann Dovey," said Duffham, who was always short with hysterics.

"I want to come to the bottom of this business; you can't tell it me while you scream. What in the world possessed you to go about with your pocket full of poison?"

She had her share of sense, and knew Duffham was not one to be trifled with; so she told the tale as well as she could for sobs.

"Have you mentioned this out of doors?" was the first question Duffham asked when it was over.

"No," interposed Dovey. "I telled 'em afore I come to you not to be soft enough for that. Not a soul have heard it, sir, but me and her" —pointing to the old mother—"and you and Master Johnny. We don't want all the parish swarming about us like so many hornets."

"Good," said Duffham. "But it is rather a serious thing, I fear. Uncertain, at any rate."

"Be it, sir?" returned Ann, raising her heavy eyes questioningly. "Do you think so?"

"Why, you see, the mischief must have lain between that beetle-powder and Crew's pills. As Crew is so careful a man, I don't think it could have been the pills; and that's the truth."

"But how could the beetle-powder have got anigh the children out of my pocket, sir?" she asked, her face scarlet, her eyes wild. "I never put my hand into my pocket while I sat there; I never did."

"You can't be sure of that," returned Duffham. "We may put our hands into our

pockets fifty times a day without remembering it."

"D'you suppose, sir, I should take out some o' that there beedle-powder and cram it down the poor innocents' throats?" she demanded, on the verge of further screams.

"Where is the powder?" questioned Duffham.

The powder was where it had been all along: in the gown-pocket. Want of opportunity, through fear of Dovey's eyes, or dread of touching the stuff, had kept her from meddling with it. When she took the gown off, the night of the inquest, she hung it up on the accustomed hook, and there it was still. The old mother went to the bedroom and brought it forward, handling it gingerly: a very smart print gown with bright flowers upon it.

Duffham looked round, saw a tin pie-dish, and turned the pocket inside out into it. A speckled kind of powder, brown and white. He plunged his fingers into it fearlessly, felt it, and smelt it. The blue paper it had been sold in lay amid it, cracked all across. Duffham took it up.

"Poison!" read out he aloud, gazing at the large letters through his spectacles. "How came you to let it break open in your pocket, Ann Dovey?"

"I didn't let it; it braked of itself," she sobbed. "If you saw the black-beedles we gets *here* of a night, sir, your legs 'ud be fit to dance

a hornpipe, they would. The floor be covered with 'em."

"If the ceiling was covered with 'em too, I'd not have that there dangerous stuff brought into the place—and so I've telled ye often," roared Dovey.

"It's frightful uncomfortable, is black beedles; mother knows it," said his wife in a subdued voice—for Dovey in great things was master. "I thought if I just sprinkled a bit on't down, it 'ud take 'em away, and couldn't hurt nobody."

"And you went off on the sly that there Tuesday night and bought it," he retorted; "and come back and telled me you had been to Reed's a-helping to physic the babies."

"And so I had been there, a-helping to physic 'em."

"Did you go straight to Reed's from the shop —with this powder?" asked Duffham.

"It were right at the bottom o' my pocket: I put it there as soon as Dame Chad had served me with it," sobbed Ann Dovey. "And I can be upon my Bible oath, Dr. Duffham, that I never touched it after; and I don't believe it had then burst. A-coming hasty out of Reed's back gate, for I were in a hurry to get home, the side o' me, where the pocket is, swung again the post, and I think the blue paper must ha' burst then. I never knowed it had burst, for I'd never thought no more about the beedles, till I put on the gownd to go up to the inquest.

Master Johnny, you be a-staring at me fearful, but I be telling nothing but the naked truth."

She did seem to be telling the truth. And as to my "staring at her fearful," that was just her imagination. I was listening to the talk from the elbow of the easy wooden chair, where I had perched myself. Duffham recommended Dovey to put the tin dish and its contents away safely, so that it did not get near any food, but not to destroy the stuff just yet. He talked a bit with Ann, left her a composing draught, and came away.

'I don't see that the powder could have had anything to do with the children's death," I said to him as we went along.

"Neither do I, Johnny!"

"Shall you have to declare this at the inquest to-morrow, Mr. Duffham?"

"I am sure I don't know," he answered, looking up at the sky overhead through his spectacles, just as a perplexed owl might do. "It might only serve to complicate matters: and I don't think it's possible it could have been the powder. On the other hand, if it be proved not to have been the pills, we have only this poisonous powder to fall back upon. It is a strange affair altogether, take it in all its bearings."

I did not answer. The evening star was beginning to show itself in the sky.

"I must feel my way in this, Johnny: be

guided by circumstances," he resumed, when we halted at the stile that led across the fields to the Manor. "We must watch the turn matters take to-morrow at the inquest. Of course if I find it necessary to declare it, I shall declare it. Meanwhile, lad, you had better not mention it to anybody."

"All right, Mr. Duffham. Good-evening."

The jury went straggling into the Silver Lion by twos and threes. Up dashed the gig of the coroner, as before, he and his clerk seated side by side. All the parish had collected about the doors, and were trying to push into the inquest room.

Gliding quietly in, before the proceedings were opened, came Abel Crew in his handsome quaint velvet suit, his silver hair shining in the sunlight, his pale face calm as marble. The coroner ordered him to sit on a certain chair, and whispered to old Jones. Upon which the constable turned his gouty legs round, marched up, and stood guard over Crew, just as though Abel were his prisoner.

"Do you see that, sir?" I whispered to Duffham.

"Yes, lad, and understand it. Crew's pills have been analysed—officially this time, as the jury put it—and found to contain arsenic. Pettipher was right. The pills killed the children."

Well, you might have sent me down with a

flash of moonshine. I had been fully trusting in Crew's innocence.

About the first witness called, and sworn, was the professional man from a distance who had analysed the pills. He said that they contained arsenic. Not in sufficient quantity to hurt a grown person; more than sufficient to kill a little child. The coroner drew in his lips.

"I thought it must be so," he said, apparently for the benefit of the jury. "Am I to understand that these were improper pills to send out?—pills that no medical man would be likely to send?"

"Not improper at all, sir," replied the witness. "A medical man would prescribe them for certain cases. Not for children: to an infant one would be what it has been here—destruction."

I felt a nudge at my elbow, and turned to see the Squire's hot face close to mine.

"Johnny, don't you ever stand up for that Crew again. He ought to be hanged."

But the coroner, after a bit, seemed puzzled; or, rather, doubtful. Led to be so, perhaps, by a question put by one of the jury. It was Perkins the butcher.

"If these pills were furnished by Abel Crew for Hester Reed, a growed woman, and she went and gave one of her own accord to the two babies, ought Crew to be held responsible for that?"

Upon which there ensued some cavilling.

Some of the jury holding that he was *not* responsible; others that he was. The coroner reminded them of what Hester Reed had stated in her evidence—that she had asked Crew's opinion about the suitability of the pills for children, and he had told her they were suitable.

Hester Reed was called. As the throng parted to make way for her to advance, I saw Ann Dovey seated at the back of the room, looking more dead than alive. Dovey stood by her, having made himself spruce for the occasion. Ann would have gone off a mile in some opposite direction, but old Jones's orders to all the witnesses of the former day, to appear again, had been peremptory. They had been wanted before, he told them, and might be wanted again.

"You need not look such a scare-crow with fright," I whispered in Ann Dovey's ear, making my way to her side to reassure her, the woman was so evidently miserable. "It was the pills that did the mischief, after all—didn't you hear? Nothing need come out about your pocket and the powder."

"Master Johnny, I'm just about skeered out o' my life, I am. Fit to go and drownd myself."

"Nonsense! It will be all right as far as you are concerned."

"I said it was Crew's pills, all along, I did; it couldn't have been anything else, sir. All the same, I wish I was dead."

As good try to comfort a post, seemingly, as

Ann Dovey. I went back to my standing-place between the Squire and Duffham. Hester Reed was being questioned then.

"Yes, sir, it were some weeks ago. My little boy was ailing, and I ran out o' the house to Abel Crew, seeing the old gentleman go past the gate, and asked whether I might give him one of them there same pills, or whether it would hurt the child. Crew said I might give it freely; he said two even wouldn't hurt him."

"And did you give the pill?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. He's a rare bad one to give physic to, Georgy is, and I let him get well without it."

"How old is he?"

"Turned of three, sir."

"You are absolutely certain, Mrs. Reed, that these pills, from which you took out two to give the deceased children, were the very self-same pills you had from Abel Crew?"

"I be sure and certain of it, sir. Nobody never put a finger upon the box but me. It stood all the while in that there corner o' the press-shelf in the children's bedroom. Twice a week when I got upon a chair to dust the shelf, I see it there. There was nobody in the house but me, except the little ones. My husband don't concern himself with the places and things."

Circumstantial evidence could not well go farther. Mrs. Reed was dismissed, and the coroner told Abel Crew to come near the table.

He did as he was bid, and stood there upright and manly, a gentle look on his face.

"You have heard the evidence, Abel Carew," said the coroner. "The pills have been analysed and found to contain a certain portion of arsenic —a great deal more than enough to kill a child. What have you to say to it?"

"Only this, sir; only what I said before. That the pills analysed were not my pills. The pills I gave to Mrs. Reed contained neither arsenic nor any other poison."

"It is showing great obstinacy on your part to repeat that," returned the coroner, impatiently. "Mrs. Reed swears that the pills were the same pills; and she evidently speaks the truth."

"I am sure she thinks she speaks it," replied Abel, gently. "Nevertheless, sir, I assure you she is mistaken. In some way the pills must have been changed while in her possession, box and all."

"Why, man, in what manner do you suppose they could have been changed?"

"I don't know, sir. All I do know is, that the pills and the box produced here last week were not, either of them, the pills and the box she had from me. Never a box went out from me, sir, but it had my private mark on it—the mark I spoke of. Jones the constable searched my place while I was detained in the lock-up, and took away all the pill-boxes out of it. Let him testify whether he found one without the mark."

At this juncture a whole cargo of pill-boxes were shot out of a bag on the table by old Jones, some empty, some filled with pills. The coroner and jury set on to examine them, and found the mark on all, lids and boxes.

"And if you'd be so good as cause the pills to be analysed, sir, they would be found perfectly free from poison," resumed Abel. "They are made from herbs that possess healing properties, not irritant; a poisonous herb, whether poisonous in itself, or one from which poison may be extracted, I never plucked. Believe me, sir, for I am telling the truth; the truth before Heaven."

The coroner said nothing for a minute or two: I think the words impressed him. He began lifting the lid again from one or two of the boxes.

"What are these pills for? All for the same disorder?"

"They were made up for different disorders, sir."

"And pray how do you distinguish them?"

"I cannot distinguish them now. They have been mixed. Even if returned to me, I could not use them. I have a piece of furniture at home, sir, that I call my pill-case. It has various drawers in it, each drawer being labelled with the sort of pills kept in it: camomile, dandelion, and so on. Mr. Jones must be able to *corroborate* this."

Old Jones nodded. He had never seen nothing neater nor more exact in all his life, than the keeping o' them there pills. He, Mr. Jones, had tumbled the drawerfuls indiscriminately into his bag, and so mixed them.

"And they will be so much loss to me," quietly observed Abel. "It does not matter."

"Were you brought up to the medical profession?" cried the coroner—and some of us thought he put the question in irony.

"No, sir," replied Abel, taking it to be serious. "I have learnt the healing art, as supplied by herbs and roots, and I know their value. Herbs will cure sometimes where the regular doctor fails. I have myself cured cases with them that the surgeons could not cure; cases that but for me, under God, might never have been cured in this world. I make no boast of it; anybody else might do as much who had made herbs a study, as I have."

"Are you making a fortune by it?" went on the coroner.

Abel shook his head.

"I have a small income of my own, sir, and it is enough for my simple wants. What little money I make by my medicines, and honey, and that—it is not much—I find uses for in other ways. I indulge in a new book now and then; and there are many poor people around who need a bit of help sometimes."

"You 'read' the stars, I am told, Abel Carew. What do you read in them?"

"The same that I read, sir, in all other of nature's works: God's wonderful hand. His wisdom, His power, His omnipotent providence."

Perhaps the coroner thought to bring Abel to self-ridicule in his replies: if so, it was a mistake, for he seemed to be getting the worst of it himself. At any rate, he quitted the subject abruptly, brushed his energy up, and began talking to the jury.

The drift of the conversation being, so far as the room could hear it, that Crew's pills, and only Crew's, could have been the authors of the mischief to the two deceased children, whose bodies they were sitting upon, and that Crew must be committed to take his trial for manslaughter. "Hester Reed's evidence," he continued, "is so clear and positive, that it quite puts aside any suspicion of the box of pills having been changed——"

"The box had not my mark upon it, sir," respectfully spoke Abel Crew, his tone anxious.

"Don't interrupt me," rebuked the coroner, sharply. "As to the box not having what he calls his private mark upon it," he added to the jury, "that in my opinion tells little. Because a man has put a mark on fifty pill-boxes, he is not obliged to have put it on the fifty-first. An unintentional omission is readily made. It ap*pears to me*——"

"Am I in time? Is it all over? Is Abel Crew found guilty?"

This unceremonious interruption to the official speech came from a woman's voice. The door of the room was pushed open with a fling, considerably discomposing those who had their backs against it and were taken unawares, and they were pushed right and left by the struggles of somebody to get to the front. The coroner looked daggers; old Jones lifted his staff; but the intruder forced her way forward with resolute equanimity. Cathy Reed: we never remembered to call her Parrifer. Cathy in her Sunday-going gown and a pink bonnet.

"How dare you!" cried the coroner. "What do you mean by this? Who are you?"

"I have come rushing over from Tewkesbury to clear Abel Crew," returned Cathy, getting up her breath after the fight. "The pills that killed the children were my pills."

The commotion this avowal caused in the room was beyond describing. The coroner stared, the jury all turned to look at the speaker, the crowd trod upon one another.

"And sorry to my heart I am that it should have been so," went on Cathy. "I loved those two dear little ones as if they were my own, and I'd rather my pills had killed myself. Just look at that, please, Mr. Coroner."

The ease with which Cathy spoke to the official gentleman, the coolness with which she

put down a pill-box on the green cloth before him, took the room by surprise. As Ann Dovey remarked, later, "She must ha' learnt that there manner in her travels with young Parrifer."

"What is this?" questioned the coroner curtly, picking up the box.

"Perhaps you'll ask Mr. Crew whether he knows it, sir, afore I say what it is," returned Cathy.

The coroner had opened it. It contained seven pills; just the size of the other pills, and looking exactly like them. On the lid and on the box was the private mark spoken of by Abel Crew.

"That is my box, sir; and these—I am certain of it—are my pills," spoke Abel, earnestly, bending over the shoulder of the topmost juryman to look into the box. "The box and the pills that I gave to Mrs. Reed."

"And so they are, Abel Crew," rejoined Cathy, emphatically. "The week afore last, which I was spending at home at father's, I changed the one pill-box for the other, inadvertent, you see,"—with a nod to the coroner—"and took the wrong box away with me. And I wish both boxes had been in the sea afore I'd done it."

Cathy was ordered to give her account more clearly, and did so. She had been suffering from illness, accompanied by neuralgia, and a doctor at Tewkesbury had prescribed some pills

for it, one to be taken occasionally. The chemist who made them up told her they contained arsenic. He was about to write the directions on the box, when Cathy, who was in a hurry, snatched it from him, saying she could not wait for that bother, flung down the money, and departed. This box of pills she had brought with her on her visit to her father's, lest she should find occasion to take one; and she had put it on the shelf of the press, side by side with the other pill-box, to be out of the way of the children. Upon leaving, she took up the wrong box inadvertently: carrying away Abel Crew's pills, leaving hers. There lay the explanation of the mystery of the fatal mistake. Mrs. Reed had not known that Cathy had any pills with her; the girl, who was just as light-headed as ever, not having chanced to mention it; and Cathy had the grace to dust the room herself while she was there.

"When father and his wife sent me word about the death of the two little twins, and that it was some pills of Abel Crew's that had done it, I never once thought o' my pills," added Cathy. "They didn't as much as come into my head. But late last night I got lent to me last Saturday's *Worcester Herald*, and there I read the inquest, and what Crew had said about the marks he put on his pill-boxes, and mother's evidence about never having shifted the pill-box from its place atop o' the press. 'Sure and I couldn't have

changed them boxes,' thought I to myself; and upstairs I ran in a fright to look at the box I had brought away. Yes, there it was; Abel Crew's box with the marks on it; and I knew then that I had left my own pills at home here, and that they had killed the babies. As soon as I could get away this morning—which was not as soon as I wanted to—I started to come over. And that's the history—and the blessed truth."

Of course it was the truth. Abel's beautiful face had a glow of light upon it. "I knew I should be cleared in God's good time," he breathed. The Squire pounced upon him, and shook both his hands as if he would never let them go again. Duffham held out his.

So that was the end of the story. Cathy got a reprimand from the coroner for her carelessness, and burst into tears in his face.

"And thee come off home wi' thee, and see me chuck that there powder into the fire; and don't go making a spectacle o' th' self again," cried Dovey sharply in his wife's ear. "Thee just let me catch thee a-bringing in more o' the dratted stuff; that's all."

"I shall never look at a black-beedle again, Jack, without shivering," she answered; going in for a slight instalment of the shivering there and then. "It might ha' come to hanging. Leastways, that's what I've been a-dreaming of."

V.

ROBERT ASHTON'S WEDDING-DAY.

THE hall clock was striking half-past five as we went out into the sharp night air: Mr. and Mrs. Todhetley, I, and Tod. We were spending Christmas that year at Crabb Cot. Old Coney's dinner was fixed for six: but country people don't observe the fashion of dashing in at the last stroke of the hour. The weather was cold, and no mistake; the snow lay on the ground; the stars shone like silver. This was Tuesday, New Year's Day; and to-morrow, the second of January, Jane Coney would be married to Robert Ashton of Timberdale. The Ashtons were to dine to-night at the Farm, and we had been asked to meet them. If everybody stood upon his own level, we should shoot up some degrees over the Coneys' heads in the scale of the globe's ladder; for old Coney was only a plain farmer; and you've learnt by this time what the Squire was. But the Coneys were right down good people, and made the best neighbours in the world.

We had but to cross the road at an angle, and old Coney had had it swept for us. It was an old-fashioned farm-house, full of nooks and angles, with one ugly, big room in it, oak-panelled. The cloth was laid there for to-night, the breakfast would be for the morrow. Old Coney and Mrs. Coney came out of the drawing-room to meet us: that was small and snug, with a running pattern of pale roses on its white-watered walls. He was jolly; she, plain, homely, and sensible.

Jane was quiet, like her mother; very well she looked, standing on the carpet in her pretty blue silk dress. Her brother Tom, a tall, strong young fellow with a red face, lifted her out of the way by the waist, that he might shake hands all round. The eldest daughter, Mary West, was staying there with her nurse and baby; she looked ill, and got up only for a minute from her chair by the fire. Her husband was a lawyer, in practice at Worcester. Another young lady was sitting by, with light frizzed hair: Mrs. James Ashton.

Before we had settled down, wheels were heard. It was Robert Ashton's dog-cart, bringing his two brothers, Charles and James; and Mary West's husband. Miss Jane's cheeks turned as red as a rose for nothing: Robert Ashton had not come with them.

I had better say who the Ashtons were. Old *Ashton* (the father) had lived at Timberdale

Court always. It was one of the best farms in all Worcestershire. Old Ashton lived in good style, educated his children, and started them well in life. Lucy, the only girl, married a Captain Bird, who turned out to be a frightful scamp. Robert remained on the farm with his father; Charles was a clergyman; James a doctor in Worcester. Everybody respected Mr. Ashton. It was about three years now since he died, and he left a good pot of money behind him. Robert succeeded to the farm, and it was he who was to marry Jane Coney to-morrow.

They went upstairs with their carpet-bags, having come direct from Worcester by train; Robert Ashton's dog-cart had been waiting, as arranged, at Timberdale Station to bring them on. Mrs. James Ashton came over earlier in the day with Mrs. West. Robert and Charles Ashton were both fine young men, but the doctor was slight and short. Now I hope all that's clear; because it was needful to say it.

What with talking and looking at the presents, the time passed. They were laid out on a table against the wall, on a snow-white damask cloth of rare beauty.

"Look here," whispered Mrs. Coney, taking up a scented blue-and-white case of satin ribbon and beads for keeping pocket-handkerchiefs in. "Poor Lucy Bird sent this. She must have made it herself: a thing like this, bought, would be as much as fifteen or sixteen shillings. It

came almost anonymously: 'With best love and ever kind wishes for Robert and Jane,' written on it; but we knew Lucy's handwriting."

"Where are they now?" asked Mrs. Todhetley, in the same mysterious whisper.

"I fancy they are staying somewhere in Worcester. We should have liked to get Lucy over for the wedding; but—you know how it is: we could not ask him."

Mrs. Todhetley nodded. She wore her grey silk gown that night, which always seemed to make her look taller and thinner than ever, and a white lace cape with pink ribbons. A pink bow was in her light hair, and she had put on her beautiful earrings.

There is some thorn in most families, and Lucy was the one in that of Ashton. She was educated at the best school in Worcester, and came home at eighteen brimfull of romance. It lay in her nature. You'd hardly have found so pretty and sentimental a girl in the county. Because her name was Lucy Ashton, she identified herself with Scott's Lucy Ashton, and looked out for a Master of Ravenswood. These sentimental girls sometimes come to grief, for they possess but three parts of their share of plain common-sense. The Master of Ravenswood came in the shape of Captain Bird, a tall, dark man, with a flaming coat and fierce moustache. He paid court to Lucy, and she fell in *love with* him before a week was over. The

Ashtons turned their backs upon him: there was something in the man they did not like, in spite of the red coat and the black moustache. But he won over Lucy—he had heard of her fortune, you see—and she promised to marry him. She was a gentle, yielding, timid girl then; but her love was strong, and she ran away. She ran away, and was married the same morning at St. Helen's church in Worcester, in which parish Bird had been staying. It was the talk of the county; but when the clatter had subsided, everybody began to pity Lucy, saying she would have plenty of time and cause for repentance. After all, he was not a real captain now. He had sold out of the army; and there arose a rumour that he had done something wrong, and was obliged to sell out.

Mr. Ashton had loved Lucy better than all his children. He forgave the marriage for Lucy's sake, and had them home on a visit, and presented her with a handsome sum. But he made a great mistake—I've heard the Squire say it often—in not settling it upon her. Bird spent it as soon as he well could; and he would have spent some more that came to Lucy when her father died, only that it was left in Robert Ashton's hands to be paid to her quarterly. People called Bird a black-leg: said he was about the worst man that ever stepped. Robert had offered Lucy a home at Timberdale Court, but she would not quit her husband: she had

married him, she said, for better or for worse. If he came to be transported—and he was going on for it—the chances were that Lucy would follow him to Van Diemen's Land.

"I say, there's six o'clock!" exclaimed Mr. Coney, as the hour struck. "Jane, what have you done with Robert?"

"Not anything, papa. He said he should be here half-an-hour before dinner."

"And it will soon be half-an-hour after it," returned old Coney. "If he does not make haste, we shall sit down without him."

The clock on the mantel-piece went ticking on, and struck half-past six. Dinner. The Squire led off the van with Mrs. Coney. Tod laid hold of Jane.

"I'll be in Robert's place while I can, Jenny."

The oak-room was a surprise. It looked beautiful. The dark walls were quite covered with holly and ivy, mixed with the blossoms of laureltinus and some bright flowers. Old Thomas (borrowed from us) and the maids stood by the sideboard; it glittered with silver. The Coneys had their stores as well as other people, and did things well when they did them at all. On the table was a large codfish, garnished with horseradish and lemon. Our names were before our places, and we took them without bustle, Robert Ashton's, next to Jane, being left vacant.

'For what——"

A faint shriek interrupted the Reverend Mr. Ashton, and the grace was broken off. Lifting his head towards the quarter whence the shriek came, he saw his sister-in-law with a scared face.

"We are thirteen!" exclaimed Mrs. James Ashton. "I beg your pardon, Charles—I beg everybody's pardon; but indeed we must not sit down thirteen to dinner on New Year's Day. I would not for any money!"

"What nonsense, my dear!" cried her husband, rather crossly. "Robert will be here directly."

It was of no use. The ladies took her part, saying they ought not to sit down. And there we all stood, uncertain what to be at, the dinner hovering in mid-air like Mahomet's coffin, and not to be eaten.

"There are two days in the year when it is not well to sit down thirteen: New Year's Day and Christmas Day," said Mrs. Todhetley, and the rest held with her.

"Are we all to go back to the drawing-room, and leave our dinner?" demanded old Coney, in wrath. "Where the plague *is* Robert? Look here: those that won't sit down thirteen can go, and those that don't mind it can stop."

"Hear, hear!" cried the Squire.

But Jane Coney went gliding to her mother's side. "I will wait for Robert in the drawing-room, mamma, and you can sit down twelve.

Yes, please; it is best so. Indeed I could not eat if I stayed."

"Shall we send you some dinner in, child?" asked Mr. Coney.

"No, thank you, papa. I would like best to take it with Robert when he comes."

"All right," said old Coney. "Johnny, you go over to that side, to make the table even. We'll have the grace now, parson."

And the parson said it.

It was a dinner that pleased the Squire's heart. He had a mortal objection to what he called kickshaws, meaning the superfluous dishes you get at a modern entertainment. The Coneys never had kickshaws, only a plain, substantial dinner, the best of its kind.

"Coney, I never taste such oyster-sauce as yours, go where I will," cried the Squire. "It can't be matched."

Old Coney winked, as much as to say he knew it. "The missis gives an eye to that, you see, Squire," he answered, in a side whisper. "She had been in the kitchen till you came."

The Squire took another ladleful. He went once or twice to every dish, and drank champagne with all of us. But still Robert Ashton did not come.

I slipped round to Mrs. Coney when the plum-pudding appeared, whispering that I would take a slice to Jane.

"So you shall, Johnny," she said, giving me

some on a plate, and putting a mince-pie beside it. "She'll have no luck unless she eats a bit of pudding and pie on the first day of the year."

Jane sat in a low elbow-chair before the fire, her head leaning sideways on her hand, her hair a little tumbled. It was very nice hair, dark chestnut, and her eyes were hazel. Robert Ashton was fair-haired and blue-eyed; Saxon all over, and very good-looking.

"I have brought you some pudding, Jane."

"Oh, Johnny! why did you leave the table? I can't eat it."

"But Mrs. Coney says you are to; and some mince-pie, too, or else you'll have no luck."

As if in obedience she ate a small bit of the pudding, cut a quarter out of the mince-pie with her fork, and ate that.

"There, Johnny, that's enough for 'luck.' You go back now to your dinner; I dare say you've not had any pudding."

"I'll stay with you, and eat this: as it is going begging."

She neither said yes nor no. She was looking frightfully uneasy.

"Are you vexed that Robert Ashton's not here, Jane?"

"I am not vexed, because I know he would have been here if he could. I think something has happened to him."

I stared at her. "What! because he is a

little late in coming? Why, Jane, you must be nervous."

She kept looking into the fire, her eyes fixed. I sat on a stool on the other side the hearth; the empty pudding-plate with its fork standing on the rug between us, where I had put it.

"Robert was *sure* to come for this dinner, Johnny, all being well, and to be in time."

"Tell me what you fear, Jane—and why?"

"I think I will tell you," she said, after a pause. "I should like to tell some one. I wish I had told Robert when he called this morning; but I was afraid he would laugh at me. You will laugh too."

And Jane Coney told it. In a low, dread voice, her eyes staring into the fire as before, just as though they could see through the blaze into the future.

Early that morning she had had a dream; a nasty, disagreeable, ugly dream about Robert Ashton. She thought he was in some frightful peril, that she cried out to him to avoid it, or it would stop their marriage. He seemed not to take the least notice of her, but to go right on to it; and in the alarm this brought her, she awoke. I listened in silence, saying nothing to the end; no, nor then.

"The dream was so intensely *real*, Johnny. It seemed to be to-day; this very day then dawning; and we both of us knew that it was; the one before our marriage. I woke up in a

fever; and but that it was night and not day, should have had a difficulty to persuade myself at first that we were not really enacting the scene—it was, as I say, so vividly real. And Robert went out to the peril, never heeding me."

"What was the peril?"

"That's what I can't tell. A consciousness lay upon me that it was something very bad and frightful; but of its nature I saw nothing. I did not go to sleep again: it must have been about six o'clock, but the mornings are very dark, you know. I got up soon: what with this dinner-party and other things, there has been a great deal to do to-day, and I soon forgot the dream. Robert called after breakfast, and the sight of him put me in mind of it. I felt a great inclination to tell him to take especial care of himself; but he would only have laughed at me. He drove away direct to the Timberdale station, to take the train for Worcester."

She did not say, though, what he had gone for to Worcester. To get the ring and licence.

"I have not felt the smallest fear of the dream all along, Johnny, since I awoke. Save for the few minutes Robert was here, I don't remember even to have thought of it. But when his brothers and Mr. West came in without him to-night, it flashed into my mind like a dart. I felt sure then that something had happened. I dare say we shall never be married now."

"Jane!"

"Well, Johnny Ludlow, I think it."

To me it seemed to be getting serious. There might be nothing at all in what she had said: most people would have said there was nothing; but, sitting there in the quiet room listening to her earnest voice, seeing her anxious face, a feeling came over me that there *was*. What had become of Robert Ashton? Where could he be?

"I wish you'd give me that shawl of mamma's," she said, pointing to one on a chair. "I feel cold."

She was shivering when I put it over her pretty white shoulders and arms. And yet the fire was roaring to the very top of the grate.

"Alone here, while you were at dinner, I went over all kinds of probabilities," she resumed, drawing the shawl round her as if she were out in the snow. "Of course there are five hundred things that might happen to him, but I can only think of one."

"Well?"—for she stopped. She seemed to be speaking very unwillingly.

"If he walked he would be almost sure to take the near way, across the Ravine."

Was she ever coming to the point? I said nothing. It was better to let her go on in her own way.

"I dare say you will say the idea is far-fetched, Johnny. What I think is, that he may have fallen down the Ravine, in coming here."

Well, I did think it far-fetched. I'd as soon have expected her to say fallen down the chimney.

"Those zigzag paths are not very safe in good weather, especially the one on the Timberdale side," she went on. "With the snow on them, perhaps ice, they are positively dangerous. One false step at the top—and the fall might kill him."

Put in this way, it seemed feasible enough. But yet—somehow I did not take to it.

"Robert Ashton is strong and agile, Jane. He has come down the zigzag hundreds of times."

"I seem to see him lying there, at the bottom of the Ravine," she said, staring as before into the fire. "I—wish—some of you would go and look for him."

"Perhaps we had better. I'll make one. Who's this?"

It was Tom Coney. His mother had sent him to see after me. I thought I'd tell him—keeping counsel about the dream—that Robert Ashton might have come to grief in the Ravine.

"What kind of grief?" asked Tom.

"Turned a summerset down the zigzag, and be lying with a leg broken."

Tom's laugh displayed his small white teeth: the notion amused him excessively. "What else would you like to suppose, Johnny?"

"At any rate, Jane thinks so."

She turned round then, the tears in her eyes, and went up to Tom in a burst of grief. It took him aback.

"Tom! Tom! if no one goes to see after him, I think I must go myself. I cannot bear the suspense much longer!"

"Why, Jenny girl, what has taken you?"

That had taken her. The fear that Robert Ashton might be lying disabled, or dead, in the Ravine. Tom Coney called Tod quietly out of the dining-room, and we started. Putting on our dark greatcoats in silence, we went out at the back-door, which was nearest the Ravine. Jane came with us to the gate. I never saw eyes so eager as hers were, as she gazed across the snow in the moonlight.

"Look here," said Tom, "we had better tuck our trousers up."

The expedition was not pleasant, I can assure you, especially the going down the zigzag. Jane was right about its being slippery: we had to hold on by the trees and bushes, and tread cautiously. When pretty near the bottom, Tod made a false step, and shot down into the snow.

"Murder!" he roared out.

"Any bones broke?" asked Tom Coney, who could hardly speak for laughing. Tod growled, and shied a handful of snow at him.

But the slip brought home to us the probability of the fear about Robert Ashton. To *slip from* where Tod did, was fun; to slip from

the top of the opposite zigzag quite another thing. The snow here at the bottom was up to our calves, and the black trousers got rolled up higher. The moonlight lay cold and white on the Ravine; the clustering trees, thick in summer, were leafless now. Had any fellow been gazing down from the top, we must have looked, to him, like three black-coated undertakers, gliding along to a funeral.

"I'll tell you what," cried Tod: "if Ashton did lose his footing, he'd not come to such mortal grief. The depth of snow would save him."

"I don't believe he did fall," said Tom Coney, stoutly. "Bob Ashton's as sure-footed as a hare. But for Jane's being so miserable, I'd have said, flat, I'd not come out on any such wild-goose errand."

On we went, wading through the sea of snow. Some of us looked round for the ghost's light, and did not see it. But rumour said that it never came on a bright moonlit night. Here we were at last!—at the foot of the other zigzag. But Robert Ashton wasn't here. And, the best proof that he had *not* fallen, was the unbroken surface of the snow. Not so much as a rabbit had scudded across to disturb its smoothness.

"I knew it," said Tom Coney. "He has not come to grief at all. It stands to reason that a fellow must have heaps to do the day before his wedding, if it's only in burning his

old letters from other sweethearts. Bob had a heap of them, no doubt; and couldn't get away in time for dinner."

"We had better go on to the Court, and see," I said.

"Oh, that be hanged!" cried the other two in a breath.

"Well, I shall. It's not much farther. You can go back, or not, as you like."

This zigzag, though steeper than the one on our side, was not so slippery. Perhaps the sun had shone on it in the day and melted the snow. I went up it nearly as easy as in good weather. Tod and Coney, thinking better of the turning back, came after me.

We should have been at Timberdale Court in five minutes, taking the short cut over hedges and ditches, but for an adventure by the way, which I have not just here space to tell of. It had nothing to do with Robert Ashton. Getting to the Court, we hammered at it hotly till the door was opened. The servant started back in surprise.

"Goodness me!" said she, "I thought it was master."

"Where is the master?" asked Tom.

"Not come home, sir. He has not been in since he left this morning."

It was all out. Instead of pitchpolling into Crabb Ravine and breaking his limbs, Bob *Ashton* had not got back from Worcester. It

was very strange, though, what could be keeping him, and the Court was nearly in a commotion over it.

When we got back to the Farm, they were laying the table for the wedding-breakfast. Plenty of kickshaws now, and some lovely flowers. The ladies, helping, had their gown-skirts turned up. This helping had not been in the evening's programme; but things seemed to have been turned upside down, and they were glad to seize upon it. Jane and her sister, Mrs. West, sat alone by the drawing-room fire, never saying a word to one another.

"Johnny, I don't half like this," whispered Mrs. Todhetley to me.

"Like what, good mother?"

"This absence of Robert Ashton."

I don't know that I liked it either.

Morning came. In an uncertainty of commotion like this, people go into each other's houses indiscriminately. The first train came in from Worcester before it was well light; but it did not bring Robert Ashton. As to the snow on the ground, it was pretty well beaten now.

"He'd not travel by that slow parliamentary thing: he'll come by the express to South Crabb Junction," said Tom Coney, thinking he would cheer away the general disappointment. Jane we had not seen.

The express would be at the Junction between nine and ten. A whole lot of us went down there. It was not farther off than Timberdale station, but the opposite way. I don't think one of us was more eager than another, unless it was the Squire. The thing was getting serious, he told us; and he went puffing about like a man looking for his head.

To witness the way he seized hold of the doors when the express steamed in, and put his old red nose inside all the carriages, looking for Robert Ashton, was a sight. The guard laid hold of his arm, saying he'd come to damage. But Robert Ashton was not in the train.

"He may come yet," said old Coney, looking fit to cry. "There'll be a train in again at Timberdale. Or, he may drive over."

But everyone felt that he would *not* come. Something told us so. It was only making believe to one another, saying he would.

"I shall go to Worcester by the next down train," said the Squire to old Coney.

"The next does not stop here."

"They'd better stop it for me," said the Squire, defiantly. "You can't come, Coney. You must stop to give Jane away."

"But if there's no bridegroom to give her to?" debated old Coney.

"There may be. You must stop on the *strength* of it."

The down train came up, and obeyed the signal to stop made by the station-master. The Squire, Tod, and Tom Coney got in, and it steamed on again.

"Now mind, I shall conduct this search," the Squire said to the others with a frown. "You young fellows don't know your right hand from your left in a business of this sort. We must go about it systematically, and find out the different places that Robert Ashton went to yesterday, and the people he saw." Tod and Tom Coney told us this later.

When they arrived at Worcester, the first man they saw at Shrubb Hill Station was Harry Coles, who had been seeing somebody off by the train, which was rather curious; for his brother, Fred Coles, was Robert Ashton's great chum, and was to be groom's-man at the wedding. Harry Coles said his brother had met Ashton by appointment the previous day, and went with him to the Registrar's office for the marriage licence — which was supplied to them by Mr. Clifton himself. After that, they went to the jeweller's, and chose the wedding-ring.

"Well, what after that?" cried the impatient Squire.

Harry Coles did not know what. His brother had come back to their office early in the afternoon—about one o'clock—saying Ashton was going, or had gone, home.

"Can't you tell which he said—going, or gone?" demanded the Squire, getting red.

"No, I can't," said Harry Coles. "I was busy with some estimates, and did not pay particular heed."

"Then you ought to have paid it, sir," retorted the Squire. "Your brother?—where is he?"

"Gone over to Timberdale ages ago. He started the first thing this morning, Squire; a big coat thrown over his wedding toggery."

The Squire growled, as a relief to his feelings, not knowing what in the world to do. He suddenly said he'd go to the Registrar's office, and started for Edgar Street on the run.

Mr. Clifton was not there, but a clerk was. Yes, Mr. Ashton of Timberdale had been there the previous day, he said, in answer to the Squire, and had got his licence. The governor (meaning Mr. Clifton, who knew the Ashtons and the Coneys well) had joked a bit with young Ashton, when he gave it. As to telling where Ashton of Timberdale and Mr. Coles had gone to afterwards, the clerk did not know at all.

So there was nothing to be gathered at the Registrar's office, and the Squire turned his steps up the town again, Tod and Coney following him like two tame lambs; for he'd not let them make a suggestion or put in a word edgeways. He was on his way to the jeweller's now: *but as he* had omitted to ask Harry Coles which

of the jewellers' shops the ring was bought at, he took them all in succession, and hit upon the right one after difficulty.

He learnt nothing there, either. Mr. Ashton of Timberdale had bought the ring and keeper, and paid for them, the master said. Of course everybody knew the young lady was Miss Jane Coney: he had brought one of her rings as a guide for size: a chased gold, with small garnet stone in it.

"I am not asking for rings and stones," interrupted the Squire, wrathfully. "I want to know if Mr. Ashton said where he was going afterwards?"

"He said never a word about it," returned the master. "When they went out of here—young Fred Coles was with him—they took the way towards the hop-market."

The Squire went to the Crown next—the inn used by the Ashtons of Timberdale. Robert Ashton had called in the previous day, about one o'clock, the waiter said, taking a small piece of bread-and-cheese, observing that he had no time for anything else, and half a glass of table-beer. Mr. Coles had come down Broad Street with him, as far as the inn door, when they shook hands and parted; Mr. Coles going back again. The waiter thought Mr. Ashton was not in the house above five minutes at the most.

"And don't you know where he went to next?" urged the Squire.

"No," the waiter replied. The impression on his mind was, that Mr. Ashton's business in Worcester was over, and that he was returning home again.

The Squire moved slowly up Broad Street, more gloomy than an owl, his hands in his pockets, his nose blue. He boasted of his systematic abilities, as applied to seekings and searchings, but he knew no more what to be at next than the man in the moon. Turning up the Cross, he came to an anchor outside the linen-draper's shop; propping his back against the window, as if the hanging silks had offended him. There he stood, staring up at St. Nicholas's clock opposite.

"Tom," said he, virtually giving in, "I think we had better talk to the police. Here's one coming along now."

When the policeman was abreast, the Squire took his hands from his pockets, and pinned the man by his button-hole.

"Mr. Ashton of Timberdale?—oh, he has got into trouble, sir," was the man's ready answer. "He is before the magistrates now, on a charge of——"

The railway omnibus, coming along at the moment, partially drowned the word.

"Charge of *what?*" roared the Squire.

The policeman repeated it. The omnibus was making a frightful clatter, and the Squire only just caught it now. With a great cry he dashed

over to the fly-stand, got into one, and ordered it to gallop away with him. Tom Coney and Tod barely escaped having to hang on behind.

"Drive like mad!" stamped the Squire.

"Yes, sir," said the man, doing it. "Where to?"

"Go on, will you, sir! To the deuce."

"To the police-court," corrected Tom Coney.

Arrived there, the Squire left them to pay the fare, and fought his way inside. The first thing his spectacles caught sight of distinctly, was the fair Saxon face and fine form of Robert Ashton, standing, a prisoner, in the criminal dock.

At the Farm, things were in a state more easy to imagine than describe. The carriages came bowling up, bringing the guests. The four bridesmaids wore pale-blue silk, trimmed with white fur. Jane was dressed. In passing her door, I saw her. They had sent me up to fetch something from Tom's room.

"Is it not a mockery, Johnny?" she said, letting me go inside. And her poor pale face looked more fit for a burying than a wedding, and her eyes had dark circles round them.

"If you mean your dress, Jane, I never saw anything less like a mockery, or more like a princess's in a fairy tale."

It was of rich white silk; a delicate wreath of myrtle and orange-blossoms on her chestnut hair. The veil lay upon the bed.

"You know what I mean, Johnny. There will be no wedding at North Crabb Church to-day—and nothing can have been more foolish than to prepare me for it. Oh, Johnny! if I could but go to sleep till ten years hence, and never wake up between!"

Before the gate waited the carriages, their postilions in scarlet jackets; the company, in their fine plumage, jostled each other in the nooks and corners of the house; the maids, wearing a bright uniform of purple gowns and white muslin aprons, ran about wildly. Every two minutes, old Coney went up to a staircase window that faced Timberdale, looking out to see whether Robert Ashton was coming—like Sister Anne, in "Bluebeard."

Twelve o'clock! It was like a knell booming out; and the carriages went away with the company. A fine ending to a wedding, that was!

I was standing at the back-door, disconsolate as the moaning wind, when the Timberdale station fly came rattling along. A gentleman put his head out of it, to tell the driver to stop. He got down, and came limping up to me. It was Mr. West's partner, old Lawyer Cockermuth, who had declined an invitation to the wedding because of gout.

"Look here," said he, catching hold of my shoulder, "I want to say half-a-dozen words to Mr. Coney. Can you manage to bring him out to me, or smuggle me into any little place where

we can be alone? I suppose the house is chock-full of them wedding people."

"You have brought bad news of Robert Ashton!" I said, in sudden conviction. "What is it?"

"Well, so I *have*," he answered confidentially. "It will soon be known to everybody, but I'd like to break it to Coney first. I've come over to do it. Robert Ashton is in custody for murder!"

I felt my face turn as pale as a girl's. "For *murder?*"

Old Cockermuth's chin grew long as he nodded. "He is in custody for nothing less than the murder of his brother-in-law, Bird. Yesterday——"

A smothered cry behind us, and I turned sharply. There stood Jane. She had seen Cockermuth's arrival; and came down, knowing he must have brought bad news. The white robe and wreath were gone, and she wore her every-day dress of violet merino.

"Now, my dear! my dear, be calm!" cried the old lawyer, in a fright. "For goodness' sake shut us in somewhere, Johnny Ludlow! We shall have the whole pack out upon us."

Some of the pack did come, before he could be shut up. And there we were—hearing that Robert Ashton had been taken up for murder.

It appeared that, after quitting the Crown on the previous day, he met his sister's husband,

Captain Bird—from habit, people still accorded him his title. Captain Bird told him Lucy was dangerously ill, and asked him to go and see her. Robert went at once to their lodgings. What exactly happened there, nobody as yet knew; but Robert and Bird got quarrelling. Robert did not come out again. In the morning (this morning) the neighbours heard a hue-and-cry; and on the door being opened by two policemen, Bird was found lying in the passage dead, as was supposed, and Robert Ashton was given into custody for his murder.

Jane touched me on the arm, and I followed her into the large, empty dining-room. That miserable breakfast! waiting for those who could not sit down to eat it. The evergreens on the walls seemed to look faded; the flowers on the table to have lost their first brightness.

"You see I was right, Johnny," she said. "That dream was a dream of warning. And sent as one."

It did look like it. But dreams are things you can't lay hold of; no, nor altogether believe in. Standing by the cold grate, she began to shake. In the confusion, the servants had let the fire go out.

"I'd forget the dream if I were you, Jane. Where's the use of people having dreams——"

"Say warnings, Johnny."

"——if they cannot see how to make use *of them*? Call them warnings, an' you like

the word better. They are of no good at all."

"Oh, Johnny, if I could but die! It was hard enough to bear when he was only missing; but now——"

It was just as though she never meant to leave off shivering. I went to hunt for some small sticks, and saw our cook, Molly, in the kitchen amidst the maids. Trust her for being in the thick of any gossip. Bringing the sticks back, I pushed them in, and they soon crackled up into a blaze. Jane sat down and watched them.

"I wouldn't be afraid, Jane, if I were you. There must be some mistake."

"I am not afraid — in one sense. That Robert has done nothing wrong willingly, I know. But—he is rather passionate; and there's no telling how they might provoke him. If there is much prolonged suspense; a trial, or anything of that—well, I suppose I shall live through it."

How hopeless she looked! her head bent, her eyes not lifted. Just then there was a cry outside for Jane. "Jane!"

"Go out, Johnny, and say I am all right. *Pray* to them to let me be alone. Tell mamma not to come in; I am easier by myself—and the fire's burning up. They have gone calling upstairs; they'd not think I am here."

Was there anything incoherent in her words?

I looked at her narrowly. I suppose that they sounded something like it.

"One has been coming to soothe me, and another has been coming; I've not known how to bear it. They mean it in kindness—great kindness; but I would so much rather be alone. You go now, Johnny."

So I shut her in. And whispered to Mrs. Coney that she was praying to be left alone.

I don't know how the day went on, except that it was miserably uncomfortable. We had some cold beef in the every-day dining-room, and old Coney, after saying he'd have given a thousand pounds out of his pocket for it not to have happened, went and smoked a pipe with Cockermuth in the best kitchen. Dusk began to come on.

Why! who was that—driving up in Robert Ashton's dog-cart? Robert! Robert himself? Yes, it was; and the Squire, and Tod, and Tom Coney with him. The dog-cart had gone to the station to wait for the Squire and the other two: they came, bringing Robert Ashton.

"Is it all right, Mr. Ashton?"

"Quite right, Johnny. You did not think it could be wrong, did you?"

"You are out on bail?"

"Out for good. There has been no real damage done. I wonder where Jane is?"

"I'll take you to her. She has been wishing *she* was dead."

Nobody in the house scented his presence. I opened the door of the large oak-room. Jane was kneeling on the hearth-rug, her face buried in the cushion of the arm-chair. She started up at the noise, and stood like one struck into stone.

"*Robert?*"

I do believe she thought it was not real—his ghost, or something. He went up in silence, slightly smiling—he was always a quiet-mannered man—and holding out his hand.

"It is I, myself, Jane. You look as though you doubted it."

With a great cry she fell forward. Robert caught her to his breast. I was going away when he hastily called to me. For the first time in her life she had fainted away. The thing had been too much for her.

"Get a drop of water, Johnny. Don't call anybody. She'll soon come to."

There was water on the table; wine too. He gave Jane some of both. And then she listened to his story, leaning on his arm, and crying as softly and peacefully as a little child.

Those outside were listening to the wonderful tale. When I went out, they had gathered in the best kitchen, round the Squire, who had gone there in search of old Coney. The Squire's glowing face was a sight to be seen. Mrs. Coney had sat down on the mahogany bench; her hands lifted. Coney stood with his pipe held at arm's length. As to Mrs.

Todhetley, the tears were running down her cheeks in a stream.

It was quite true that Lucy Bird was very ill. Robert saw her in bed. As he was leaving, Bird began upon the old grievance—that he should have some of Lucy's money advanced in a lump. He wanted it for his cards and dice, you see. Robert told him, No: as he had told him all along. An associate of Bird's was there; a very bad man, named Dawler. They got Robert to take a friendly glass of wine—which purported to be sherry: and from that moment he lost all power, and partly consciousness. The wine was drugged. Their object, no doubt, had been to partly stupify him, and so induce him to sign an undertaking to hand over the money to Bird. But they had made the potion a trifle too strong, not calculating on the effect it would take on a young and habitually sober man. Robert fell into a deep sleep, from which it was impossible to arouse him all night: as to writing, his hands were as dead. Late in the morning he awoke; and, bit by bit, realised where he was and what had passed. He was a little stupid even then, but sensible enough to remember that it was his wedding-day, and to foresee that he might have some trouble to get away from the house. On attempting to leave, Bird and Dawler placed themselves in the passage to prevent him. There was a *hot contest*. Robert Ashton, a stronger man

than either of the others, but aware that all his strength was not then at his own command, seized on a knotted stick, or club, that was lying in a corner, and lifted it to fight his way through. Dawler struck at it, to thrust it out of his hand, and struck it against Bird's head with frightful force. The fellow dropped as one dead, and the door was burst open by the neighbours and policeman. The excitement, perhaps the exertion, acting on Robert Ashton's only partly recovered state, turned him stupid again: the people took him to be drunk, and Dawler gave him in charge for murder.

That was the history. When the Squire had got into the police-court, Robert Ashton (who was nearly himself again through the remedies the doctor had given him in the police-station) was telling this tale. Dawler was contradicting him, and swearing hard and fast that it was a case of deliberate murder. The magistrates invited the Squire to a seat beside them: and the first thing he did was to break into a hot tantrum, vowing Robert Ashton couldn't be guilty. How it would have terminated no one knew, but Lucy saved him.

Lucy saved him. A wan, haggard young woman, wrapped in an old shawl, staggered into the justice-room, to the front of the room. It was Lucy Bird. She had come crawling along the streets to tell the truth.

"My brother Robert did not attempt to strike

any one," she said, in a low, weak, earnest tone. "He but held the club in his hand. I saw it all; I stood by. It was Dawler who threw his weight upon the club, and struck down my husband. Robert fell too; pushed down by Dawler. This is the sole truth, before Heaven!"

They believed her. The best was, that Bird was not dead at all, only stunned: and the next to appear in court was himself, with a big white plaister on his forehead. Discovering his wife's private flight to the magistrates, he thought it well to go after her: there was no knowing what plots might be in the wind. He had the grace to acknowledge that the blow was an accident. The whole bench shook hands with Robert Ashton, telling Bird and the other man significantly that they had better take care what they were about for the future: and the Squire brought him home in triumph.

"But where is Robert?" asked old Coney and the rest. Why, in there with Jane: where else should he be? They burst into the oak-room in a body, and found him trying on the ring.

"Why shouldn't we have a dinner to-night?" asked old Coney. "Last night's was but half a dinner, through some bother or another."

"Hear, hear!" cried the Squire. "Why not?"

The only thing against it was—as Mrs. Coney

said—that no dinner was prepared. Unless they could put up with a cold one.

"And glad to," spoke up everybody. So the cold meats were brought from the larder, and the fowls from the breakfast-table, and laid in the every-day dining-parlour. The ladies were in their ordinary gowns, and there was no room for elbows, but we made up with laughter. Sixteen this evening; Fred Coles being there and old Cockermuth, who sat down in spite of the gout. Afterwards we went off by the light of the stars to summon the company to the morrow's wedding: it was good to go knocking at the doors with the news. While the servants at the Farm, with Molly to help them, began cooking fresh fowls for the breakfast-table.

And that's about all. There was never a better wedding seen, and the scarlet jackets of the post-boys dazzled one's eyes in the morning sun. Robert Ashton was calm and quiet in church; Jane too, and not a bit nervous. The chief speech at the breakfast was undertaken by the Squire, so you may give a guess what it was like: but it didn't spoil the wedding-cake.

Jane was shut up with her mother when the time came for starting, and came out in a great flood of sobbing tears. She was leaving her childhood's home, you see. Robert would have hurried her straight to the carriage, but the company wouldn't be done out of their leave-taking. I was the last.

"Thank you for all, Johnny," she sobbed, wringing my hand as she went down the path. "They were all very kind to me yesterday, but it seemed that you were kindest."

In, the next minute, both of them, with the door shut, and the carriage away towards South Crabb Junction. The people cheered, the cocks crew, and the old shoes flew after them in a shower.

VI.

HARDLY WORTH TELLING.

YOU remember what I, Johnny Ludlow, said in the last paper—that on our way to Timberdale Court we met with an adventure, which I had not then time to tell of. It was this.

After our race through Crabb Ravine by moonlight, looking for Robert Ashton, we went on to Timberdale Court as fast as the snowy ground would admit of, Joseph Todhetley and Tom Coney rushing on in front, I after them —they were older and stronger than I was. Not by the ordinary highway, but over fields and hedges and ditches, straight as the crow flies, wishing to save time. Instead of saving time, we lost it, for though the road, had we taken it, was longer, the snow was beaten there; whereas it was lying deep across the country and had to be waded through. But you can't always bring common sense to bear at the moment it's wanted. And if we had looked like three undertakers at a funeral, stalking after one another in the Ravine, with our dark

coats showing out against the white snow, I'm sure we must have looked more like it in the open ground.

At the far corner of the square meadow was a cow-shed, unused since the autumn, when Ashton of Timberdale had caused the fields about here to be ploughed. Beyond the shed, touching its walls, ran a brook; and it brought us up. We had meant to take it at a flying leap; but the snow had melted there, and the brook was swollen. It was not agreeable to run the chance of pitching in, and it seemed that we should have to make for the gate, lower down. Standing for a moment to reconnoitre, there broke on our ears a low moan; and then another.

"I say," cried Tod, "is that the ghost!" I said in that last paper, as anybody may see, that we had looked out for the ghost in the Ravine. The moaning came again.

"If I don't believe it is in the cow-shed!" exclaimed Tom Coney. And he went round to the door and shook it open.

Pitch dark inside and the same moaning, soft and low. Tom Coney had some lights in his pocket, and struck one. Well! we were astonished. On the ground lay a woman—or girl—and a very little child. She had a young face with anxious eyes and feverish cheeks. She said she was dying, and so answered our questions; but we had to kneel down to hear.

She had walked across the country from somewhere in Gloucestershire, carrying her baby of a fortnight old, but the weakness and fever overtook her. Two nights ago she had crept into the shed, and lain there, unsuspected, since.

"But why did you leave your home?" inquired Tod.

"I couldn't stay for the shame," was the nearly inaudible answer: and but that our ears were good ones, we should not have caught it. If we would but fetch her a drop of water for the love of Christ, she said as we got up.

It was impossible to help wondering whether God had not let Robert Ashton be lost on purpose to bring us round there. But for our passing, both she and the baby must very soon have died, for the shed was quite out of the reach of any road likely to be traversed. We must have seemed to her like angels of mercy. Perhaps we were made use of as such that night.

"Have you lain here all that while—two nights and days—without food?" asked Tod in his softest voice.

"Without food, sir, and without drink. Oh for a drop of water!—If you could but bring it me, I should die easier."

We got some clean snow and moistened her lips with it. She gave a sobbing cry as it trickled down her throat: Tom Coney said it was choking, but I thought it was joy. To a poor creature in a burning fever, lying without

any kind of drink for days and nights, the fresh cold snow must have tasted like dew from heaven. She motioned that the baby should have some, but we were afraid: it looked to be dying.

What could be done with her? To carry her away was not practicable—and she seemed too ill besides. Tom Coney offered to cover up the baby under his coat and take it to the Court for food and shelter; but she clutched it closer to her side as it lay on her arm, and faintly said it couldn't do without her. Shutting the shed door again, we got quickly to Timberdale Court, found Robert Ashton was not at home, as you heard, and asked for the housekeeper, Mrs. Broom.

She was sitting in her little carpeted room, off the big kitchen, with one of the maids. They were sewing white bows on a lot of caps, and wondering what had become of the master. To be burst in upon by us, all three telling the story at once of the woman and child, pretty nearly scared good old Mother Broom's senses away.

"You be just playing a trick upon me, young gentlemen."

"It is as true as that we are here, Mrs. Broom; it is true as gospel. They'll both be dead if something's not done for them."

"Well, I never heard of such a thing," she exclaimed, beginning to stir about. "Lying in that cow-shed for two days without help! You

ought to have brought the poor baby away with you, sirs."

"She'd not let it come."

"I'd not have minded her saying that. A fortnight-old baby lying in the shed in this cold!"

"I don't think it will make much difference in the long-run, whether the baby stays in the shed or comes out of it," said Tom Coney. "If it sees to-morrow's dawn, I shall wonder."

"Well, this *is* a fine start!" cried Mother Broom. "And the master never to have come home—that's another," she went on. For, what to do, she didn't know the least in the world, and was like a lunatic with a lost head.

We left the matter to her, carrying some things to the shed as we passed it on our way home—blankets and a pillow, fresh water, milk-and-water for the baby, and a candle and matches. One of the women servants was to come after us, with hot broth and wine.

When we reached Crabb Cot, the dismay there at hearing Robert Ashton had not turned up, was diversified by this news, which we told of. Not that they thought very much of it; the woman was but a poor tramp, they said; and such things—fevers, and that—happen to poor tramps every day.

"Do you think the baby's dying?" asked Charles Ashton, the parson.

"I'm nearly sure it is," said Tom Coney.

"That's a kind of woman, you know, that

ought to be committed for fourteen days' hard labour," observed the Squire, fiercely, who was in a frightfully cross mood, with the various mishaps and uncertainties of the evening. "Seems to be very sickly and humble, you say, Mr. Johnny! Hold your tongue, sir: what should you know about it? These women tramps bring death on their infants through exposure."

"And that's true," said old Coney. "I'd punish 'em, Squire, if I were a magistrate like you."

But what do you think that Parson Ashton did? When the dog-cart had taken him and Mr. and Mrs. James Ashton to the Court—where they were to stay all night—he started off for the shed, and did not come away from it until he had baptized the baby.

We heard nothing more about it until the next day—and I don't suppose anybody has forgotten what sort of a miserable day that was, at old Coney's Farm. How the wedding never took place, and Robert Ashton was still missing, and Jane Coney was dressed in her bridal robes for nothing, and the breakfast could not be eaten, and we guests staring in each other's faces like so many helpless dummies. What news we had of it then, came from Charles Ashton: he had been to the shed again that morning. While the carriages stood waiting at the gate, the post-boys' scarlet jackets flaming

in the sun, and the company indoors sat looking hopelessly for the bridegroom, Parson Ashton talked about it in a corner to Mrs. Coney and the Squire's wife: both of them in their grand silk plumage then, one plum-coloured, the other sea-green, with feathers for top-knots.

The little baby was dead, Charles Ashton said. The mother had been removed to a shelter in Timberdale village, and was being cared for. The doctor, called in to her, Darbishire, thought she might get over it.

"You baptized the child, I hear, Charles?" said Mrs. Coney, to the parson.

"Oh yes."

"What did you name it?"

"Lucy. Something in the mother's face put me in mind of my sister, and it was the name I first thought of. I asked the mother what she would have it called. Anything, she answered; it did not matter. Neither did it, for the little thing was dying then. Hot-water bottles and other remedies were tried last night as soon as they could be had, to get warmth into the child —to renew its life, in fact; but nothing availed."

"Where was the woman taken to?"

"To Jael Batty's. Jael consented to take her in."

"I suppose it is but another case of the old, sad story?" groaned Mrs. Todhetley.

"Nothing else. And she, poor thing, is not much more than a girl."

"Now, Charles, I tell you what. It may be all very consistent for you clergymen—men of forgiveness, and that—to waste your compassion over these poor stray creatures, but I think it might do more good sometimes if you gave them blame," spoke Mrs. Coney, severely.

"There are times and seasons when you cannot express blame, however much it may be deserved," he answered. "The worst of it in these cases is, that we rarely know there exists cause for censure before it is too late for any censure to avail, or avert the evil."

What with the astounding events of the day, connected with the broken-off wedding, nothing more was said or thought of the affair. Except by Jane. When she and I were in the big dining-room together—I trying to blow up the fire, and she in full dread that Robert Ashton would have to be tried for his life at the Worcester Spring Assizes, and lie in prison until then—she suddenly spoke of it, interrupting the noise made by the crackling of the sticks.

"So that poor baby's dead, Johnny! What a happy fate—not to grow up to trouble. Charles named it Lucy, I hear. I should like to see the poor mother."

"See her for what, Jane?"

"She is in distress, and so am I. I don't suppose she has a corner to turn to for comfort in the wide world. I have not."

It was not so very long after this that *her*

distress was over. Robert Ashton arrived in triumph, and so put an end to it. One might suppose Jane would no longer have remembered that other one's distress; what with the impromptu dinner, where we had no room for our elbows, and the laughter, and the preparations for the next day's wedding.

But the matter had laid hold of Jane Coney's mind, and she reverted to it on the morrow before going away. When the wedding-breakfast was over, and she—never more Jane Coney, but Jane Ashton—had changed her dress and was saying good-bye to her mother upstairs, she suddenly spoke of it.

"Mamma, I want to ask you to do something for me."

"Well, my dear?"

"Will you see after that poor young woman who was found in the shed?"

Naturally Mrs. Coney was taken by surprise. She didn't much like it.

"After that young woman, Jane?"

"Yes; for me."

"Mrs. Broom has seen to her," returned Mrs. Coney, in a voice as if her tongue had frozen.

"Mother dear," said Jane, "I was comparing myself with her yesterday; wondering which of us was the worst off, the most miserable. I thought I was. I almost felt that I could have changed places with her."

"Jane!" angrily interjected Mrs. Coney.

"I did. She knew the extent of her trouble, she could see all that it involved; I did not see the extent of mine. I suppose it is always thus—that other people's sorrows seem light when compared with our own. The reason must no doubt be that we cannot realise theirs, while we realise ours only too sharply."

"My dear, I don't care to talk of this."

"Nor I much—but hear me for a minute, mother. God has been so merciful to me, and she is still as she was, that I—I should like to do what I can for her when we come back, and comfort and keep her."

"Keep her!"

"Keep her from want, I mean."

"But, child, she has been—you don't know what she has been," gravely rebuked Mrs. Coney.

"I think I do, mother."

"She is a poor outcast, Jane; with neither home to go to, nor friends to look upon her."

Jane burst into tears: they had been hardly kept down since she had begun to speak.

"Just so, mother. But what was I yesterday? If Robert had been tried for his life, and condemned, I should have felt like an outcast; perhaps been looked upon as no better than one by the world."

"Goodness, Jane, I wish you'd exercise your common sense," cried Mrs. Coney, losing patience. "I tell you, she *is* an outcast, and

has forfeited home and friends. She has been a great sinner."

"Mother, if she had a home and friends, there would be no need to succour her. As to sin—perhaps we can save her from that for the future. My gratitude for the mercy shown to *me* is such, that I feel as if I could take her to my bosom; it seems to my mind that I ought to do something for her, that she is thrown in my way that I should do it. Mother, it is my last petition to you: see after her a little for me until we come back."

"Very well, dear; as you make this point of it," concluded Mrs. Coney, relenting just a little. And then Jane began to sob hysterically; and Tom Coney knocked at the door, saying time was up.

Mrs. Coney was not a hard-hearted woman, just the opposite: but it is only those who live in rural parts of the country can imagine the tricks and turns of regular tramps, and what a bad lot some of them are. They deceive you with no end of a plausible tale, and stare pitifully in your face while they tell it. Not long before this, a case had happened where both our house and the Coneys' had been taken in. A woman in jagged-out-widows' garments presented herself at the door of Crabb Cot and asked to see the Squire. Her shoes wanted the upper-leathers, and had no soles, and one side of her face was bandaged up. Mrs. Tod-

hetley went to her. Of all pitiable tales that poor woman told the most: 'twould have melted a heart of stone. She came from near Droitwitch, she said: her husband had worked under Sir John Pakington; that is, had been a labourer on part of his estate, Westwood Park. She lost her husband and grown-up son the past autumn with fever; she caught it herself, and was reduced to a skeleton, lost her cottage home through the things being seized for rent, and went to live with a married daughter in Oxfordshire. Cancer had appeared in her cheek—here she pulled aside the big bandage and showed a glimpse of something frightful—the daughter could not keep her, for she and all her children were down with sickness, and the husband had no work—and she, the widow, was making her way by easy walking stages to Worcester, there to try and get into the infirmary. What she wanted at Crabb Cot was—not to beg, either money or food: money she could do without, food she could not eat—but to implore the gentleman (meaning the Squire) to give her a letter to the infirmary doctors so that they might take her in.

I can tell you that she took *us* in—every one of us. The Squire, coming up during the conference, surrendered without fight. Questions were put to her about Droitwitch and Ombersley, which she answered at once. There could be no mistake that she knew all the neighbourhood *about* there well, and Sir John and Lady Pak-

ington into the bargain. I think it was that that threw us off our guard. Mrs. Todhetley, brimming over with compassion, offered her some light refreshment, broth or milk. She said she could not swallow either, it "went against her," but she'd be thankful for a drink of water. Molly. the greatest termagant to tramps and beggars in general, brought out a half-pint bottle of store cordial, made, by her own hands, of sugared blackberry juice and spice, for the woman to put in her pocket and sip, on her journey to Worcester. Mrs. Todhetley gave her a pair of good shoes and some shillings, and two old linen handkerchiefs for the sick face; and the Squire, putting on his writing spectacles, wrote a letter to Mr. Carden, begging him to see if anything, in the shape of medical aid, could be done for the bearer. The woman burst into tears of loud thankfulness, and went away with her presents, including the letter, Molly the cross-grained actually going out to open the back gate for her.

And now would anybody *believe* that this woman had only then come out of the Coneys' house—where she had been with the same tale and request, and had received nearly the same relief? We never saw or heard of her again. The note did not reach Mr. Carden; no such patient applied to the infirmary. She was a clever impostor; and we got to think that the cheek had only been rubbed up with a little

blistering-salve. Many another similar thing I could tell of—and every one of them true. So you must not wonder at Mrs. Coney's unwillingness to interfere with this latest edition in the tramp line.

But she had given her promise: perhaps, as Jane put it, she could not do otherwise. And on the morning after the wedding she went over to Timberdale. I was sliding in the Ravine—for there was ice still in that covered spot, though the frost had nearly disappeared elsewhere—when I saw Mrs. Coney come down the zigzag by the help of her umbrella, and her every-day brown silk gown on.

"Are you here, Johnny! Shall I be able to get along?"

"If I help you, you will, Mrs. Coney."

"Take care. I had no idea it would be slippery here. But it is a long way round by the road to walk, and the master has taken out the pony-chaise."

"What wind is blowing you to Timberdale to-day?"

"An errand that I'm not at all pleased to go upon, Johnny; only Jane made a fuss about it before leaving yesterday. If I told the master he would be in a fine way. I am going to see the woman that you boys found in the shed."

"I fancied Jane seemed to think a good deal about her."

"Jane did think a good deal about her," returned Mrs. Coney. "She has not had the experience of this kind of people that I have, Johnny; and girls' sympathies are so easily aroused."

"There was a romance about it, you see."

"Romance, indeed!" wrathfully cried Mrs. Coney. "That's what leads girls' heads away: I wish they'd think of good plain sense instead. It was nothing but romance that led poor Lucy Ashton to marry that awful man, Bird."

"Why does Lucy not leave him?"

"Ah! it's easier to talk about leaving a man than to do it, once he's your husband. You don't understand it yet, Johnny."

"And shall not, I suppose, until I am married myself. But Lucy has never talked of leaving Bird."

"She won't leave him. Robert has offered her——goodness me, Johnny, don't hurry along like that! It's nothing but ice here. If I were to get a tumble, I might be lamed for life."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Coney! It would be only a Christmas gambol."

"It's all very well to laugh, Johnny. Christmas gambols mean fun to you young fellows with your supple limbs; but to us fifty-year-old people they may be something else. I wish I had tied some list round my boots."

We left the ice in the Ravine, and she came

up the zigzag path easily to the smooth road. I offered to take the umbrella.

"Thank you, Johnny; but I'd rather carry it myself. It's my best silk one, and you might break it. I never dare trust my umbrellas to Tom: he drives them straight out against trees and posts, and snaps the sticks."

She turned into Timberdale Court, and asked to see Mrs. Broom. Mrs. Broom appeared in the parlour with her gown-sleeves turned up to the elbow, and her hands floury. She had been housekeeper during old Mr. Ashton's time.

"Look here," said Mrs. Coney, dropping her voice a little, "I've come to ask a word or two about that woman—from the shed, you know. Who is she?—and what is she?"

But the dropping of Mrs. Coney's voice was as nothing to the dropping of the housekeeper's face. The questions put her out uncommonly.

"I wish to my very heart, ma'am, that the woman—she's but a poor young thing at best!—had chose any part to fall ill in but this! It's like a Fate."

"Like a what?" cried Mrs. Coney.

"And so it is. A cross Fate for this house. 'Tis nothing less."

"Why, what do you mean, Broom?"

Mother Broom put her head forward, and said a word or two in Mrs. Coney's ear. Louder, I suppose, than she thought for, if she had intended me not to hear.

"Raves about Captain Bird!" repeated Mrs. Coney.

"He is all her talk, ma'am—George Bird. And, considering that George Bird, blackleg though he has turned out to be, married the young lady of this house, Miss Lucy Ashton, why it goes again the grain for me to hear it."

Mrs. Coney sat down in a kind of bewilderment, and gave me the silk umbrella. Folding her hands, she stared at Mother Broom.

"It seems as though we were always hearing fresh news about that man, Broom; each time it is something worse than the last. If he took all the young women within his reach, and—and—cut their arms off, 'twould be only like him."

"'George!' she'll moan out in her sleep. That is, in her dreaming, or her fever, or whatever it is. 'George, you ought not to have left me; you should have taken care of me.' And then, ma'am, she'll be quiet a bit, save for turning of her head about; and begin again, 'Where's my baby? where's my baby?' Goodness knows 'twould be sad enough to hear her if it was anybody's name but Bird's."

"There might be worse names than his, in the matter of giving us pain," spoke Mrs. Coney. "As to poor Lucy—it is but another cross in her sad life."

"I've not told this to nobody," went on Mother Broom. "Jael Batty's three parts

deaf, as the parish knows, and may not have caught Bird's name. It will vex my master frightfully for Miss Lucy's sake. The baby is to be buried to-day. Mr. Charles has stayed to do it."

"Oh, indeed!" snapped Mrs. Coney, and got up, for the baby appeared to be a sore subject with her. "I suppose the girl was coming across the country in search of Bird?"

Broom tossed her head. "Whether she was or not, it's an odd thing that this house should be the one to have to succour her."

"I am going," said Mrs. Coney, "and I half wish I had never come in. Broom, I am sorry to have hindered you. You are busy."

"I am making my raised pies," said Broom. "It's the second batch. What with master's coming marriage, and one thing and another, I did not get 'em done before the new year. Your Molly says hers beat mine, Master Ludlow; but I don't believe it."

"She does, does she! It's just like her boasting. Mrs. Todhetley often makes the pork-pies herself."

"Johnny," said Mrs. Coney, as we went along, she in deep thought, "that poor Lucy Bird might keep a stick for notches—as it is said some prisoners used to do, to mark their days—and notch off her dreadful cares, that are ever recurring. Why, Johnny, what's that crowd for?"

The church stood on the right between Timberdale Court and the village. A regular mob of children seemed to be pressing round the gate of the churchyard. I ran to look, leaving Mrs. Coney standing.

Charles Ashton was coming out of the church in his surplice, and the clerk, old Sam Mullet, behind him, carrying a little coffin. The grave was in the corner of the burial-ground, and Mr. Ashton went straight to it, and continued the service begun in the church. If it had been a lord's child, he could not have done it all in better order.

But there were no mourners, unless old Mullet could be called one. He put the coffin on the grass, and was in a frightful temper. I took off my hat and waited: it would have looked so to run away when there was nobody else to stand there: and Mrs. Coney's face, as cross as old Mullet's, might be seen peering through the hedge.

"It's come to a pretty pass, when tramps' brats have to be put in the ground like honest folks's," grunted Sam, when Mr. Ashton had walked away, and he began to fling in the spadefuls of earth. "What must he needs go and baptize that there young atom for?—he ain't our parson; he don't belong to we in this parish. I dun-no what the world be a-coming to."

Mr. Ashton was talking to Mrs. Coney when

I got up. I told him what a way Sam Mullet was in.

"Yes," said he. "I believe what I did has not given satisfaction in all quarters; so I waited to take the service myself, and save other people trouble."

"In what name is the dead child registered, Charles?" asked Mrs. Coney.

"Lucy Bird."

"Lucy Bird! *Bird?*"

"It was the name the mother gave me in one of her lucid intervals," answered the clergyman, shortly.

He hastened away, saying he must catch a train, for that his own parish was wanting him; but I fancied he did not care to be further questioned. Mrs. Coney stood still to stare after him, and would have liked to ask him how much and how little he knew.

Lucy Bird! It did sound strange to hear the name—as if it were the real Lucy Bird we knew so well. I said so to Mrs. Coney.

"The impudence of the woman must pass all belief," she muttered to herself. "Let us get on, Johnny! I'd rather run a mile any other way than go to see her."

Leaving me on the wooden bench outside Jael Batty's door, she went in. It was remarkably lively: the farrier's shop opposite to look at, five hay-ricks, and a heap of children who strolled after us from the churchyard, and stayed

to stare at me. Mrs. Coney came out again soon.

"It's of no use my remaining, Johnny. She can't understand a word said to her, only lies there rambling, and asking people to bring her baby. If she had any sense left in her, she might just go down on her knees in thankfulness that it's gone. Jael Batty says she has done nothing else but wail for it all the blessed morning."

"Well, it is only natural she should."

"Natural! Natural to mourn for that baby! Don't you say stupid things, Johnny. It's a great mercy that it has been taken; and you must know that as well as anybody."

"I don't say it's not; babies must be no end of noise and work; but you see mothers care for them."

"Do not be a simpleton, Johnny. If you take to uphold tramps and infants dying in sheds, goodness knows what you'll come to in time."

At the end of a fortnight, Ashton of Timberdale and his wife came home. It was a fine afternoon in the middle of January, but getting dusk, and a lot of us had gone over to the Court to see them arrive. Jane looked as happy as a queen.

"Johnny," she whispered, while we were standing to drink some tea that Mother Broom (with a white cockade in her cap) brought in

upon a silver tray, "how about that poor woman? She is not dead, I hope?"

I told Jane that she was better. The fever had gone down, but she was so weak and reduced that the doctor had not allowed her to be questioned. We knew no more of who she was than we had known before. Mrs. Coney overheard what I was saying, and took Jane aside.

There seemed to be a bit of a battle: Mrs. Coney remonstrating with a severe face, Jane holding out and flushing a little. She was telling Jane not to go to Jael Batty's, and representing why she ought not to go. Jane said she must go—her heart was set upon it: and began to re-tie her bonnet strings.

"Mother dear, don't be angry with me in this the first hour of entering on my new home—it would seem like a bad omen for me. You don't know how strongly I have grown to think that my duty lies in seeing this poor woman, in comforting her if I can. It cannot hurt me."

"What do you suppose Robert would say? It is to him you owe obedience now, Jane, not to me."

"To him first, and to you next, my mother; and I trust I shall ever yield it to you both. But Robert is quite willing that I should go: he knows all I think about it."

"Jane, I'd not have said a word against it; *in*deed I had made up my mind that it was a

good wish on your part; but now that we have discovered she is in some way connected with—with the Birds—why, I don't think Robert will like you to meddle with it. I'm sure I shrink from telling him."

Jane Coney—Ashton I mean: one can't get out of old names all at once—looked down in distress, thinking of the pain it would cause her husband for his sister's sake. Then she took her mother's hand.

"Tell Robert what you have told me, mamma. He will still let me go, I think; for he knows how much I wish it."

They had their conference away from us; Mrs. Coney, Robert Ashton, and Jane. Of course he was frightfully put out; but Jane was right—he said she should go all the same. Mrs. Coney shut her lips tight, and made no further comment.

"I promised her, you see, Mrs. Coney," he urged. "She has an idea in her head that—I'm sure I scarcely know what it is, except that her going is connected with gratitude and Duty, and—and Heaven's blessing. Why, do you know we might have stayed out another week, but for this? I could have spared it; but she would come home."

"I never knew Jane take a thing up like this before," said Mrs. Coney.

"Any way, I suppose it is I who shall have to deal with it—for the sake of keeping it from

Lucy," was Robert's answer. "I wish with all my heart Bird had been at the bottom of the sea before his ill-omened steps brought him to Timberdale! There's not, as I believe, another such scamp in the world."

Jane waited for nothing else. Shielded by the dusk of the evening, she went running to Jael Batty's and back again.

"I'll go down for her presently," said Robert. But she was back before he started.

"I came back at once to set the misapprehension right," said Jane, her eyes bright with eagerness, her cheeks a beautiful crimson. "Mother dear—Robert—Johnny—listen all of you: that poor sick woman is George Bird's sister."

"Jane!"

"Indeed she is. Captain Bird used to talk to Lucy of his little sister Clara—I have heard you say so, Robert—in the old days when he first came here. It is she who is lying at Jael Batty's—Clara Bird."

The company sat down like so many lambs, Mrs. Coney's mouth and eyes alike opening. It sounded wonderful.

"But—Jane, child—there was still the baby!"

"Well—yes—I'm afraid so," replied Jane in an uncomfortable hurry. "I did not like to ask her about that, she cries so. But she is Clara Bird; Captain Bird's sister, and Lucy's too."

"Well, I never!" cried Mrs. Coney, rubbing

her face. "Poor misguided young thing—left to the guardianship of such a man as that, he let her go her own way, no doubt. This accounts for what Broom heard her say in the fever—'George, you should have taken care of me.'"

"Is she being taken care of now in her sickness, down at Jael Batty's," spoke up Robert.

"Yes. For Jael, though three parts deaf, is a kind and an excellent nurse."

Robert Ashton wrote that night to Worcester; a sharp letter; bidding Captain Bird come over and see to his sister. The poor thing took to Jane wonderfully, and told her more than she'd have told anybody else.

"I am twenty," she said, "and George is six-and-thirty; there is all that difference between us. Our father and mother were dead, and I lived with my aunt in Gloucestershire: where George lived, I did not know. He had been adopted by a wealthy relative in London, and went into the army. My mother had been a lady, but married beneath her, and it was her family who took to George and brought him up a gentleman. Mine was a hard, dull life. My aunt—she was my father's sister—counted ever-so-many children, and I had to nurse and see to them. Her husband was a master plumber and glazier. One day—it is fifteen months ago now—I shall never forget it—my brother George

came. I did not know him: I had not seen him since I was thirteen, and then he was a fine handsome gentleman in an officer's regimentals. He was rather shabby now, and he had come to see if he could borrow money, but my aunt's husband would not lend; he told him he had much ado to keep his own family. I cried a good deal, and George said he would take me to London to his wife. I think he did it to spite them, because of their not lending the money, as much as to please me—he saw that I should be a loss there. We went up—and oh how nice I thought his wife! She was a kind, gentle lady, formerly Miss Lucy Ashton; but nearly always sick, and afraid of George. George had gay acquaintances, men and women, and he let me go to theatres and balls with them. Lucy said it was wrong, that they were not nice friends for me; but I grew to like the gaiety, and she could do nothing. One night, upon going home from church, I found both George and Lucy gone from the lodgings. I had been spending the Sunday with some people they knew, the quietest of all their friends. There lay a note on the table from Lucy, saying they were obliged to leave London unexpectedly, and begging me to go at once—on the morrow—back to Gloucestershire, for which she enclosed a sovereign. I did not go: one invited me, and another invited me, and it was two months, good, before I went down.

Ah me! I heard no more of George; he had got into some trouble in London, and was afraid to let it be known where he was. I've never heard of him or his wife to this hour. My aunt was glad to see me for the help I should be to her; but I felt ill always and could not do so much as I used. I didn't know what ailed me; I didn't indeed; I did not think it could be much; and then, when the time went on and it all happened, and they knew, and I knew, I came away with the baby because of the reproach and the shame. But George ought not to have left me to myself in London."

And when Jane Ashton repeated all this to Robert, he said Bird deserved to be hung and quartered.

There came no answer from Captain Bird. Perhaps Ashton of Timberdale did not really expect any would come.

But on the Sunday afternoon, from the train that passed Timberdale from Worcester about the time folks came out of church, there descended a poor, weak woman (looking like a girl too) in a worn shawl that was too thin for the weather. She waited until the roads should be clear, as if not wanting to be seen, and then lapped the shawl close around her arms and went out with her black veil down. It was Lucy Bird. And she was so pretty still, in spite of the wan thin cheeks and the faded clothes! There were two ways of getting to

Jael Batty's from the station. She took the long and obscure one: and in turning the corner of the lane between the church and Timberdale Court, she met Robert Ashton.

But for her own movement, he might never have noticed her. It was getting dusk; and when she saw him coming, she turned sharp off to a side stile and stood as if looking for something in the field. There's not much to stare at in a ploughed field at dusk, as Ashton of Timberdale knew, and he naturally looked at the person who had gone so fast to do it. Something in the cut of the shoulders struck him as being familiar, and he stopped.

"Lucy! Is it you?"

Of course it was no use her saying it was not. She burst into tears, trembling and shaking. Robert passed round her his good strong arm. He guessed what had brought her to Timberdale.

"Lucy, my dear, have you come over from Worcester?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "I shall be better in a minute, Robert. I am a little tired, and the train shook me."

"You should have sent me word, and I'd have had a fly at the station."

Sent him word! It was good of Robert to pretend to say that; but he knew that she'd not have presumed to do it. It was that feeling *on* Lucy's part that vexed him so much.

Since Bird had turned out the villain that he had, Lucy acted, even to her own family, as though she had lost caste, identifying herself with her husband, and humbling herself to them. What though she was part and parcel with the fellow, as Robert said, she was not responsible for his ill-doings.

"Lean on me, Lucy. You must have a good rest."

"Not that way," she said at the bottom of the lane, as he was turning to the Court. "I am going to Jael Batty's."

"When you have had some rest and refreshment at home."

"I cannot go to your home, Robert."

"Indeed but you can; and will," he answered, leading her on.

"I'd rather not. Your wife may not care to receive me."

"Come and try her."

"Robert, I am not fit to see anyone: I am not indeed. My spirits are low now, and I often burst into tears for nothing. I have been praying, all the way over, not to meet you. After what was done to you at our house but a week or two ago, I did not expect ever to have been noticed by you again. Jane must hate me."

"Does she! Jane and I have been concocting a charming little plot about you, Lucy. We are going to have your old room made ready,

and the sweet-scented lavender sheets put on the bed, and get you over to us. For good, if you will stop; long enough to recruit your health if you will not. Don't you remember how you used to talk in the holidays about the home sheets; saying you only got them smelling of soap at school?"

A faint smile, like a shade, flitted over Lucy Bird's face at the reminiscence.

"I should not know the feel of fine white linen sheets now: coarse calico ones have had to content me this many a day. Let me turn, Robert! For my own sake I'd rather not meet your wife. You cannot know how I feel about seeing old friends; those who—who——"

Those who once knew me, she meant to say; but broke down with a sob. Robert kept walking on. Lucy was a great deal younger than he, and had been used to yield to him from the time she was a child. Well for her would it have been, that she had yielded to his opinion when Captain Bird came a-courting to Timberdale.

"You have company at your house, perhaps, Robert?"

"There's not a soul but Jane and me. The Coneys invited us to dine there to-day, but we thought we'd have the first Sunday to ourselves. We went to church this morning; and I came out after dinner to ask after old Arkwright: they fear he is dying."

She made no further opposition, and Robert took her into the Court, to the warm dining-room. Jane was not there. Robert put her into the arm-chair that used to be their father's, and brought her a glass of wine.

"No, thank you," she faintly said.

"You must drink it, Lucy."

"I am afraid. My head is weak."

"A sign you want something good to strengthen it," he urged; and she drank the wine.

"And now take off your bonnet, Lucy, and make yourself at home, while I go to seek Jane," said he.

"Lucy is here," he whispered, when he had found his wife. "The merest shadow you ever saw. A wan, faded thing that one's heart bleeds to look upon. We must try and keep her for a bit, Jane."

"Oh, Robert, if we can! And nurse her into health."

"And deliver her from that brute she calls husband—as I should prefer to put it, Jane. Her life with him must be something woful."

When they got in, she was leaning forward in the chair, crying silently. In the dear old room, with all its familiar features about her, memory could but have its most painful sway. Her grand old father with his grand old white hair, used to sit where she was sitting; her brothers had each his appointed place; and she was the lovely bright child amidst them, petted

by all; the sentimental girl with her head as brimful of romance as ever the other Lucy Ashton's had been, when she went out to her trysts with the Master of Ravenswood. Which had been the more bitter after-fate in life—that Lucy's or this one's?

Mrs. Ashton went quietly up, put her arms round Lucy, and kissed her many times. She untied the bonnet, which Lucy had not done, and gave it with the shawl to Robert, standing behind. The bright hair fell down in a shower —the bonnet had caught it—and she put her feeble hand up as if to feel the extent of the disaster. It made her look so like the sweet young sister they had all prized, that Robert turned to the window and gave a few stamps, as if his boots were cold.

How she cried!—tears that came from the very heart. Putting her face down on the arm of the chair, she let her grief have its way. Jane held her hand and stroked it lovingly. Robert felt inclined to dash his arms through the dark window-panes on which the fire-light played, in imaginary chastisement of the scamp, Bird.

"Could you lend me a shawl of your own, Jane?" she asked by-and-by, when Robert said they would have tea in—and she glanced down at her shabby brown gown. "I don't wish the servants to see me like this."

Jane flew out and brought one. A handsome

cashmere of scarlet and gold-colour, that her mother had given her before the wedding.

"Just for an hour or two, until I leave," said Lucy, as she covered herself up in it.

"You will not go out of this house to-night, Lucy."

"I must, Robert. You can guess who it was I came to Timberdale to see."

"Of course I can. She is going on all right and getting stronger; so there's no immediate haste about that. Mr. Bird would not—not come, I suppose."

Lucy did not answer. Robert was right—Bird would not come: his young sister might die where she was or be sheltered in the workhouse, for all the concern he gave himself. For one thing, the man was at his wits' end for money, and not too sure of his own liberty. But Lucy's conscience had not let her be still: as soon as she had scraped together the means for a third-class ticket, she came over.

"The poor girl has lain like a weight upon my mind, since the time when we abandoned her in London," confessed Lucy.

"Why did you abandon her?"

"It was not my fault," murmured Lucy; and Robert felt vexed to have asked the hasty question. "I hoped she went home, as I desired her; but I did not feel sure of it, for Clara was but thoughtless. And those unsuspicious country girls cannot take care of themselves too

well. Robert, whatever has happened I regard as our fault," she added, looking up at him with some fever in her eyes.

"As Mr. Bird's fault; not yours," corrected Robert—who, strange perhaps to say, observed courtesy in speech towards Bird when talking with Lucy: giving him in general a handle to his name. It might have sounded ironical, but that he couldn't help. "Did you never write to ascertain what had become of her, Lucy?"

"My husband would not let me. He is often in difficulties: and we never have a settled home, or address. What will be done with her, Robert?"

"She'll stay where she is until she is strong; Jane wishes it; and then we shall see about the future. Something will turn up for her in some place, I've little doubt."

Jane glanced at her husband and smiled. Robert had made her the promise to help the girl to an honest living. But, as he frankly told his wife, had he known it was a sister of Bird's, he might never have given it.

"About yourself, Lucy; that may be the better theme to talk of just now," he resumed. "Will you remain here for good in your old home?"

The hot tears rushed to her eyes, the hot flush to her cheeks. She looked deprecatingly at them both, as if craving pardon.

"*I cannot.* You know I cannot."

"Shall I tell you what Bird is, Lucy?—And what he most likely will be?"

"To what end, Robert?" she faintly asked. "I know it without."

"Then you ought to leave him—for your own sake. Leave him before you are compelled."

"Not before, Robert."

"But why?"

"Oh, Robert, don't you see!" she answered, breaking down. "He is my husband."

And nothing else could they get from her. Though she cried and sobbed, and did not deny that her life was a fear and a misery, yet she would go back to him; go back on the morrow, it was her duty. In the moment's anger Robert Ashton said he'd wash his hands of her as well as of Bird. But Jane and Lucy knew better.

"What can have induced you and Robert to take up this poor Clara, in the way you are doing—and mean to do?" she asked when she was alone with Jane at the evening's close.

"I——owe a debt of gratitude; and I thought I could best pay it this way," was Mrs. Ashton's timid and rather unwilling answer.

"A debt of gratitude! To Clara?"

"No. To Heaven."

And that's all the history. Perhaps it was hardly worth telling.

VII.

CHARLES VAN RHEYN.

I SHALL always say it was a singular thing that I should chance to go back to school that time the day before the quarter opened. Singular, because I heard and saw more of the boy I am going to tell of than I otherwise might have heard and seen. I was present at his arrival; and I was present at his—well, let us say, at his departure.

The midsummer holidays were nearly up when Hugh was taken ill. Duffham was uncertain what the illness was going to be: so he pitched upon scarlatina. Upon that, the Squire and Mrs. Todhetley packed me back to school there and then. Not from any fear of my taking it; I had had it, and Tod too (and both of us were well again, I recollect, within a week or so); but if once the disease had really shown itself, Dr. Frost would not have liked us to return lest we might convey it to the school. Tod was in Gloucestershire. He was written to, and told not to return home, but to go *straight* to school.

Dr. Frost was surprised to see me. He said my coming back was quite right; and I am sure he tried to put me at ease and make me comfortable. Not a single boy had stayed the holidays that summer, and the Doctor and I were alone. The school would open the following day, when masters and boys were alike expected to return. I had dinner with the Doctor—he usually dined late during the holidays—and we played at chess afterwards.

Breakfast was just over the next morning when the letters came in. Amid them was one from France, bearing the Rouen post-mark. Now the Doctor, learned man though he was in classics, and what not, could make nothing of French. Carrying the letter to the window, turning its pages over and back again, and staring at it through his spectacles, he at last brought it to me.

"You are a pretty good French scholar, Johnny; can you read this? I can't, I confess. But the paper's so thin, and the ink so pale, and the writing so small, I could scarcely see it if it were English."

And I had to go over it twice, before I could make it out. As he said, the ink was pale, and it was a frightfully small and cramped handwriting. The letter was dated Rouen, and was signed curtly, "Van Rheyn," French fashion, without the writer's Christian name. Monsieur Van Rheyn wrote to say, that he was about to

consign his son, Charles Aberleigh Van Rheyn, to Dr. Frost's care, and that he would arrive quickly after the letter, having already departed on his journey under the charge of a "gentilhomme Anglais." It added that the son would bring credentials with him; that he spoke English, and was of partly English descent, through his mother, the late Madame Van Rheyn, *née* Aberleigh.

"Rather a summary way of consigning a pupil to my charge," remarked Dr. Frost. "Aberleigh?—Aberleigh?" he continued, as if trying to recollect something, and bending his spectacles over the letter. "She must have been one of the Aberleighs of Upton, I should think. Perhaps Hall knows?—I have heard her mention the Aberleighs."

Ringing the bell, the housekeeper was sent for. Dr. Frost asked her what she knew of the Aberleighs of Upton.

"There's none of them left now to know, sir," answered Hall. "There never was but two—after the old mother died: Miss Aberleigh and Miss Emma Aberleigh. Good fortunes the young ladies had, sir, and both of them, I remember, married on the same day. Miss Aberleigh to Captain Scott, and Miss Emma to a French gentleman, Mosseer Von Rheyn."

"I should think, by the name, he was Dutch—or Flemish; not French," remarked the Doctor.

"Anyway, sir, he was said to be French," returned Hall. "A dark, sallow gentleman who wore a braided coat. The young ladies never came back to their home after the wedding-day, and the place was sold. Captain Scott sailed with his wife for Injee, and Mosseer Von Rheyn took Miss Emma off to his house in France."

"Do you recollect where his home was?—In what part of France?"

"No, sir. And if I did, I should never be able to speak the name. Not long ago, I heard it said that poor Miss Emma was dead—Mrs. Von Rheyn, that is. A nice quiet girl, she was."

"Then I conclude the new pupil, spoken of to me, must be the son of Monsieur Van Rheyn and Miss Emma Aberleigh," remarked the Doctor, when Hall was dismissed. "You must help to make things pleasant for him, Johnny: it will be a change at first from his own home and country. Do you remember that other French boy we had here?"

I did. And the remembrance made me laugh. He used to lament every day that he had not a plate of soup to dine off, and say the meat was tough.

Strolling out at the front iron gates in the course of the morning, wondering how long the boys were going to be before some of them put in an appearance, I caught sight of the first. He was walking up from the Plough and Harrow Inn, and must have come by the omni-

bus that plied backwards and forwards between the inn and the station, The Plough and Harrow man-of-all-work followed behind, carrying a large trunk.

Of all queer figures, that boy looked the queerest. I wondered who he was, and whether he could really be coming as a pupil. His trousers and vest were nankeen, his coat was a kind of open blouse, and flew out behind him like a big round tail; the hat he wore was a great big tall chimney-pot with a wide brim. Off went the hat, with a bow and a flourish of the arm, as he reached me and the gates.

"I ask your pardon, sir. This is, I believe, the pension of Mister the Doctor Frost?"

The French accent, though that was slight, the French manners, the French turn of the words told me who it was. For a minute or two I really could not answer for staring at him. He seemed to have arrived with a shaved head, as if just out of gaol, or of brain fever.

The hair was cut as closely as it could be cut, short of shaving: his face was red and round and covered with freckles: you could not have put a pin's point between them. Really and truly it was the most remarkable figure ever seen out of a picture. I could not guess his age exactly: something perhaps between twelve and fourteen. He was slender and upright, and to all appearance strong.

"I think you must be Charles Van Rheyn,"

I said then, holding out my hand to welcome him. "Dr. Frost is expecting you."

He put his hand into mine after a moment's hesitation, not seeming quite to understand that he might: but such a glad brightness came into his rather large and honest grey eyes, that I liked him from that hour, in spite of the clothes and the freckles and the shorn head. He had crossed to Folkestone by the night boat, he said, had come on to London, and the gentleman, who was his escort so far, had there put him into an early train to come on to his destination.

Dr. Frost was at the window, and came to the door. Van Rheyn stood still when within a yard of him, took his hat off with the most respectful air, and bowed his head down to the ground. He had evidently been brought up with a reverence for pastors and masters. The Doctor shook hands. The first thing Van Rheyn did on entering the reception parlour, was to produce from some inner pocket a large, square letter, sealed with two flaming red seals and a coat of arms; which he handed to the Doctor. It contained a draft for a good sum of money in advance of the first three months' payment, and some pages of closely-written matter in the crabbed hand of Monsieur Van Rheyn. Dr. Frost put the pages aside to await the arrival of the French master.

"My father was unable to remit the exact amount of money for the trimestre, sir, not know-

ing what it would be," said young Van Rheyn. "And there will be the extra expenses besides. He will arrange that with you later."

"The end of the term would have been time enough to remit this," said the Doctor, smiling. "It is not our custom to receive payment in advance."

"It is the custom in France, sir, I assure you. And, besides, I am to you a stranger."

"Not quite a stranger altogether: I believe I know something of your mother's family," said Dr. Frost. "How came your father to fix upon my school for you?"

"My mother knew of your school, sir: she and my father used to talk of placing me at it. And an English gentleman who came lately to Rouen spoke of it—he said he knew you very well. That again put it into my father's head to send me."

It was the same Van Rheyn that they had thought—the son of Miss Emma Aberleigh. She had been dead two years.

"Are you a Protestant or a Roman Catholic?" questioned Dr. Frost.

"I am Protestant, sir: the same that my mother was. We attended the Eglise of Monsieur le Pastor Mons, of the Culte Evangélique."

The Doctor asked him if he would take anything before dinner, and he chose a glass of eau sucrée. The mal de mer had been rather

strong, he said, and he had not since been able to eat.

Evidently Hall did not approve of eau sucrée. She had never made eau sucary, she said, when sent to for it. Bringing in the water and sugar, she stood by to watch Van Rheyn mix it, her face sour, her lips drawn in. I am sure it gave her pleasure, when he asked for a few drops of orange-flower water, to be able to say there was not such a thing in the house.

"This young gentleman is the son of the Miss Emma Aberleigh you once knew, Hall," spoke the Doctor, with a view no doubt to put her on good terms with the new pupil.

"Yes, sir," she answered crustily. "He favours his mamma about the eyes."

"She must have had very nice eyes," I put in.

"And so she had," said Van Rheyn, looking at me gratefully. "Thank you for saying it. I wish you could have known her!"

"And might I ask, sir, what has become of the other Miss Aberleigh?" asked Hall of Van Rheyn. "The young lady who went off to Injee with her husband on the wedding-day."

"You would say my Aunt Margaret," he rejoined. "She is quite well. She and the Major and the children will make the voyage to Europe next year."

Efter the eau sucrée came to an end, the Doctor turned him over to me, telling me to take care of him till dinner-time, which that day

would be early. Van Rheyn said he should like to unpack his box, and we went upstairs together. Growing confidential over the unpacking, he gave me scraps of information touching his home and family, the mention of one item leading to another.

His baptismal name in full, he said, was Charles Jean Aberleigh; his father's was Jean Marie. Their home was a très joli château close to Rouen: in five minutes you could walk thither. It was all much changed since his mother died (he seemed to have loved her with a fervent love and to revere her memory); the last thing he did on coming away for England was to take some flowers to her grave. It was thought in Rouen that his father was going to make a second marriage with one of the Demoiselles de Tocqueville, whom his Aunt Claribelle did not like. His Aunt Claribelle, his father's sister, had come to live at the château when his mother died; but if that Thérèsine de Tocqueville came into the house she would quit it. The Demoiselles de Tocqueville had hardly any *dot*,—which would be much against the marriage, Aunt Claribelle thought, and bad for his father; because when he, Charles, should be the age of twenty-one, the money came to him; it had been his mother's and was so settled: and his father's own property was but small. Of course he should wish *his father* to keep always as much as he pleased,

but Aunt Claribelle thought the English trustees would not allow that. Aunt Claribelle's opinion was, that his father had at length decided to send him to a pension in England while he made the marriage; but he (Charles) knew that his mother had wished him to finish his education in England, and to go to one of the two colleges to which English gentlemen went.

"Here comes old Fontaine," I interrupted at this juncture, seeing his arrival from the window.

Van Rheyn looked up from his shirts, which he was counting. He seemed to have the tidiest ways in the world. "Who is it that you say? Fontaine?"

"Monsieur Fontaine, the French master. You can talk away with him in your native tongue as much as you will, Van Rheyn."

"But I have come here to speak the English tongue, not the French," debated he, looking at me seriously. "My father wishes me to speak and read it without any strange accent; and I wish it also."

"You speak it very well already."

"But you can hear that it is not my native tongue—that I am the foreigner."

"Yes."

"Well, I must learn to speak it without that —as the English do. It will be necessary."

I supposed he might allude to his future life. "What are you to be, Van Rheyn?" I inquired.

"What profession, do you ask? I need not

be any: I have enough fortune to be a rentier —I don't know what you call that in English; it means a gentleman who lives on his money. But I wish, myself, to be an English priest."

"An English priest! Do you mean a parson?"

"Yes, I mean that. So you see I must learn the English tongue. My mother used to talk to me about the priests in her land——"

"Parsons, Van Rheyn."

"I beg your pardon: I forget. And I fear I have much caught up the French names for things since my mother died. It was neither priest nor parson she used to call the English ministers."

"Clergymen, perhaps."

"That was it. She said the clergymen were good men, and she should like me to be one clergyman. In winter, when it was cold, and she had some fire in her chamber, I used to sit up there with her, after coming home from classe, and we talked together, our two selves. I should have much money, she said, when I grew to be a man, and could lead an idle life. But she would not like that: she wanted me to be a good man, and to go to heaven when I died, where she would be; and she thought if I were a clergyman I should have serious thoughts always. So I wish to be one clergyman."

He said all this with the utmost simplicity and composure, just as he might have spoken of going for a ride. There could be no mistake

that he was of a thoroughly straightforward and simple-minded nature.

"It might involve your living over here, Van Rheyn: once you were in Orders."

"Yes, I know. Papa would not mind. England was mamma's country, and she loved it. There was more peace in England than in France, she thought."

"I say, she must have been a good mother, Van Rheyn."

In a moment his grey eyes were shining at me through a mist of tears. "Oh, she was so good, so good! You can never know. If she had lived I should never have had sorrow."

"What did she die of?"

"Ah, I cannot tell. She was well in the morning, and she was dead at night. Not that she was strong ever. It was one Dimanche. We had been to the office, she and I——"

"What office?"

"Oh, pardon—I forget I am speaking English. I mean to church. Monsieur Mons had preached; and we were walking along the street towards home afterwards, mamma talking to me about the sermon, which had been a very holy one, when we met the Aunt Claribelle, who had come into the town for high mass at St. Ouen. Mamma asked her to come home and dine with us: and she said yes, but she must first go to say bon-jour to old Madam Soubités. As she parted from us, there was suddenly a great

outcry. It was fête at Rouen that Sunday. Some bands of music were to play on the estrade in the public garden, competing for a prize, consequently the streets were crowded. We looked back at the noise, and saw many horses, without riders, galloping along towards us; men were running after them, shouting and calling; and the people, mad with fright, tumbled over one another in the effort to get away. Later, we heard that these horses, frightened by something, had broken out of an hotel post-yard. Well, mamma gave just a cry of fear and held my hand tighter, as we set off to run with the rest, the horses stamping wildly after us. But the people pushed between us, and I lost her. She was at home before me, and was sitting on the side of the fountain, inside the château entrance-gate, when I got up, her face all white and blue, and her neck and throat beating, as she clung to the nearest lion with both hands. It alarmed me more than the horses had, for I had never seen her look so. 'Come in, mamma,' I said, 'and take a little glass of cordial;' but she could not answer me, she did not stir. I called one of the servants, and by-and-by she got a little breath again, and went into the house leaning upon both of us, and so up to her chamber. Quite immediately papa came home: he always went into town to his club on the Sunday mornings, and he ran for Monsieur Petit, the

médecin—the doctor. By seven o'clock in the evening, mamma was dead."

"Oh dear! What was the cause?"

"Papa did not tell me. He and Monsieur Petit talked about the heart: they said it was feeble. Oh, how we cried, papa and I! He cried for many days.——I hope he will not bring home Thérèsine de Tocqueville!"

The dinner-bell rang out, and we went down. Dr. Frost was putting up the letter, which old Fontaine had been translating to him. It was full of directions about Van Rheyn's health. What he was to do, and what not to do. Monsieur Van Rheyn said his son was not strong: he was not to be allowed to do the gymnastics, or the "boxing," or to play at rough games, or take violent exercise of any kind; and a small glass of milk was to be given him at night when he went to bed. If the clothes sent over with him were not suitable to the school, or in accordance with the English mode, Dr. Frost was prayed to be at the trouble of procuring him new ones. He was to be brought well on in all the studies necessary to constitute the "gentilhomme," and especially in the speaking and reading of English.

Dr. Frost directed his spectacles to Charles Van Rheyn, examining him from top to toe. The round, red face, and the strongly-built frame appeared to give nothing but indications of robust health. The Doctor questioned him

in what way he was not strong—whether he was subject to a cough, or to want of appetite, and other such items. But Van Rheyn seemed to know nothing about it, and said he had always been quite well.

"The father fears we should make him into a muscular Englishman, hence these restrictions," thought Dr. Frost.

In the afternoon, the fellows began to come in, thick and threefold: Tod amidst them, who arrived about tea-time. To describe their amazement when they saw Van Rheyn is quite beyond me. It seemed that they never meant to leave off staring. Some of them gave him a little chaff, even that first night. Van Rheyn was very shy and silent. Entirely at his ease as he had been with me alone, the numbers seemed to daunt him; to strike him and his courage into himself.

On the whole, Van Rheyn was not liked. Once let a school set itself against a new fellow at first—and Van Rheyn's queer appearance had done that much for him—it takes a long while to bring matters around—if they ever are brought round. When his hair began to sprout, it looked exactly like pig's bristles. And that was the first nickname he got: Bristles. The Doctor had soon changed his style of coat, and *he* wore jackets, as we did.

Charles Van Rheyn did not seem inclined to grow sociable. Shy and silent as he had shown himself to them that first evening, so he remained. True, he got no encouragement to be otherwise. The boys threw ridicule on him continually, making him into an almost perpetual butt. Any mistake in the pronunciation of an English word—Van Rheyn never made a mistake as to its *meaning*—they hissed, and groaned, and shouted at. I shall never forget one. Being asked when that Indian lot intended to arrive (meaning the Scotts), and whether they would make the voyage in a palanquin (for the boys plied him with questions purposely), he answered, "Not in a palanquin, but in a sheep"—meaning ship. The uproar at that was so loud, that some of the masters looked in to know what was up.

Van Rheyn, too, was next door to helpless. He did not climb, or leap, or even run. Had not been used to it, he said. What *had* he been used to do, then, he was asked one day. Oh, he had sat out in the garden with his mother; and since her death, with Aunt Claribelle, and gone for an airing in the carriage three times a week. Was he a girl? roared the boys. Did he sew patchwork? Not now; he had left off sewing when he was nine, answered Van Rheyn innocently, unconscious of the storm of mockery the avowal would invoke. "Pray, were you born a young lady?—or did they

change you at nurse?" shouted Jessup, who would have kept the ball rolling till midnight. "I say, you fellows, he has come to the wrong school: we don't take in girls, we don't. Let me introduce this one to you, boys—'Miss Charlotte.'" And, so poor Charley Van Rheyn got that nickname as well as the other. Miss Charlotte!

Latin was a stumbling-block. Van Rheyn had learnt it according to French rules and French pronunciation, and he could not readily get into our English mode. "It was bad enough to have to teach a stupid boy Latin," grumbled the under Latin master (under Dr. Frost), "but worse to have to un-teach him." Van Rheyn was not stupid, however; if he seemed so, it was because his new life was so strange to him.

One day the boys dared him to a game at leap-frog. Some of them were at it in the yard, and Van Rheyn stood by, looking on.

"Why don't you go in for it?" suddenly asked Parker, giving him a push. "There is to be a round or two at boxing this evening, why don't you go in for *that?*"

"They never would let me do these rough things," replied Van Rheyn, who invariably answered all the chaffing questions civilly and patiently.

"Who wouldn't? Who's 'they'?"

"My mother and my Aunt Claribelle. Also,

when I was starting to come here, my father said I was not to exert myself."

"All right, Miss Charlotte; but why on earth did not the respectable old gentleman send you over in petticoats? Never was such a thing heard of, you know, as for a girl to wear a coat and pantaloons. It's not decent, Miss Charlotte; it's not modest."

"Why you say all this to me for ever? I am not a girl," said poor Van Rheyn.

"No? don't tell fibs. If you were not a girl you'd go in for our games. Come! Try this. Leap-frog's especially edifying, I assure you: expands the mind. *Won't* you try it?"

Well, the upshot was, that they dared him to try it. A dozen, or so, set on at him like so many wolves. What with that, and what with their stinging ridicule, poor Van Rheyn was goaded out of his obedience to home orders, and did try it. After a few tumbles, he went over very tolerably, and did not dislike it at all.

"If I can only learn to do as the rest of you do, perhaps they will let me alone," he said to me that same night, a kind of hopeful eagerness in his bright grey eyes.

And gradually he did learn to go in for most of the games: running, leaping, and climbing. One thing he absolutely refused—wrestling.

"Why should gentlemen, who were to be gentlemen all their lives, fight each other?" he asked; "they would not have to fight as men;

it was not kind; it was not pleasant; it was hard."

The boys were hard on him for saying it, mocking him frightfully; but they could not shake him there. He was of right blue blood; never caving-in before them, as Bill Whitney expressed it one day; he was only quiet; and *endured.*

Whether the native Rouen air is favourable to freckles, I don't know; but those on Van Rheyn's face gradually disappeared over here. The complexion lost its redness also, becoming fresh and fair, with a brightish colour on the cheeks. The hair, getting longer, turned out to be of a smooth brown: altogether he was good-looking.

"I say, Johnny, do you know Van Rheyn's ill?"

The words came from William Whitney. He whispered them in my ear as we stood up for prayers before breakfast. The school had opened about a month then.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Don't know," answered Bill. "He is staying in bed."

Cribbing some minutes from breakfast, I went up to his room. Van Rheyn looked pale as he lay, and said he had been sick. Hall declared it was nothing but a bilious attack, and Van Rheyn thought she might be right.

"Meaning that you have a sick headache, I suppose?" I said to him.

"Yes, the migraine. I have had it before."

"Well, look here, Charley," I went on, after thinking a minute; "if I were you, I'd not say as much to any of them. Let them suppose you are regularly ill. You'll never hear the last of it if they know you lie in bed for only a headache."

"But I cannot get up," he answered; "my head is in much pain. And I have the fever. Feel my hand."

The hand he put out was burning hot. But that went with sick headaches sometimes.

It turned out to be nothing worse, for he was well on the morrow; and I need not have mentioned it at all, but for a little matter that arose out of the day's illness. Going up again to see him after school in the afternoon, I found Hall standing over the bed with a cup of tea, and a most severe, not to say horror-struck, expression of countenance, as she gazed down on him, staring at something with all her eyes. Van Rheyn was asleep, and looked better; his face flushed and moist, his brown hair, still uncommonly short compared with ours, pushed back. He lay with his hands outside the bed, as if the clothes were heavy—the weather was fiery hot. One of the hands was clasping something that hung round his neck by a narrow blue ribbon; it seemed to have been pulled by him out of the

opening in his night-shirt. Hall's quick eyes had detected what it was—a very small, flat cross (hardly two inches long), on which was carved a figure of the Saviour, all in gold.

Now Hall had doubtless many virtues. One of them was docking us boys of our due allowance of sugar. But she had also many prejudices. And, of all her prejudices, none was stronger than her abhorrence of idols, as exemplified in carved images and Chinese gods.

"Do you see that, Master Ludlow?" she whispered to me, pointing her finger straight at the little cross of gold. "It's no better than a relict of paganism."

Stooping down, she gently drew the cross out of Van Rheyn's hot-clasped hand, and let it lie on the sheet. A beautiful little cross it was: the face of our Saviour—an exquisite face in its expression of suffering and patient humility—one that you might have gazed upon and been the better for. How they could have so perfectly carved a thing so small, I knew not.

"He must be one of them worshipping Romanics," said Hall with horror, snatching her fingers from the cross as if she thought it would give her the ague. "Or else a pagan."

And the two were no doubt alike in Hall's mind.

"And he goes every week and says his commandments in class here, a-standing up afore all *the school*! I wonder what the Doctor——"

Hall cut short her complaints. Van Rheyn had suddenly opened his eyes, and was looking up at us.

"I find myself better," he said with a smile. "The pain has mostly departed."

"We wasn't thinking of pains and headaches. Master Van Rheyn, but of *this*," said Hall resentfully, taking the spoon out of the saucer, and holding it within an inch of the gold cross. Van Rheyn raised his head from the pillow to look.

"Oh, it is my little cross!" he said, holding it out to our view as far as the ribbon allowed, and speaking with perfect ease and unconcern. "Is it not beautiful?"

"Very," I said, stooping over it.

"Be you of the Romanic sex?" demanded Hall of Van Rheyn.

"Am I—— What is it Mistress Hall would ask?" he broke off to question me, in the midst of my burst of laughter.

"She asks if you are a Roman Catholic, Van Rheyn."

"But no. Why you think that?" he added to her. "My father is the Roman Catholic: I am the Protestant, like my mother."

"Then why on earth, sir, do you wear such a idol as that?" returned Hall.

"This? Oh, it is nothing! it is not an idol. It does me good."

"Good!" fiercely repeated Hall. "Does you

good to wear a brazen image next the skin! ——right under the flannel waistcoat. I wonder what the school will come to next!"

"Why should I not wear it?" said Van Rheyn. "What harm does it do me, this? It was my poor Aunt Annette's. The last time we went to the Aunt Claribelle's to see her, when the hope of her was gone, she put the cross into my hand, and bade me keep it for her sake."

"I tell you, Master Van Rheyn, it's just a brazen image," persisted Hall.

"It is a keepsake," dissented Van Rheyn. "I showed it to Monsieur Mons one day when he was calling on mamma, and told him it was the gift to me of the poor Tante Annette. Monsieur Mons thought it very pretty, and said it would remind me of the great Sacrifice."

"But to wear it again' your skin!" went on Hall, not giving in. Giving in on the matter of graven images was not in her nature. Or on any matter, as far as that went, that concerned us boys. "I've heard of poor misdeluded people putting horse-hair next 'em. And fine torment it must be!"

"I have worn it since mamma died," quietly answered Van Rheyn, who seemed not to understand Hall's zeal. "She kept it for me always in her little shell-box that had the silver crest on it; but when she died, I said I would put the cross round my neck, for fear of losing it:

and Aunt Claribelle, who took the shell-box then, bought me the blue ribbon."

"That blue ribbon's new—or a'most new—if ever I saw new ribbon," cried Hall, who was in a mood to dispute every word.

"Oh yes. It was new when I left Rouen. I have another piece in my trunk to put on when this shall wear out."

"Well, it's a horrid heathenish thing to do, Master Van Rheyn; and, though it may be gold, I don't believe Miss Emma Aberleigh would ever have gave countenance to it. Leastways afore she lived among them foreign French-folks,' added Hall, virtually dropping the contest, as Van Rheyn slipped the cross out of view within his night-shirt. "What she might have come to, after she went off there, heaven alone knows. Be you a-going to drink this tea, sir, or be you not?"

Van Rheyn drank the tea and thanked her gratefully for bringing it, the gratitude shining also out of his nice grey eyes. Hall took back the cup and tucked him up again, telling him to get a bit more sleep and he would be all right in the morning. With all her prejudices and sourness, she was as good as gold when any of us were ill.

"Not bathe! Not bathe! I say, you fellows, here's a lark. Bristles thinks he'd better not try the water."

It was a terribly hot evening, close upon sunset. Finding ourselves, some half-dozen of us, near the river, Van Rheyn being one, the water looked too pleasant not to be plunged into. The rule at Dr. Frost's was, that no boy should be compelled to bathe against his inclination: Van Rheyn was the only one who had availed himself of it. It was Parker who spoke: we were all undressing quickly."

"What's your objection, Miss Charlotte? Girls bathe."

"They would never let me go into cold water at home," was the patient answer. "We take warm baths there."

"Afraid of cold water! well, I never! What an everlasting big pussy-cat you are, Miss Charlotte! We've heard that pussies don't like to wet their feet."

"Our doctor at Rouen used to say I must not plunge into cold water," said poor Van Rheyn, speaking patiently as usual, though he must have been nearly driven wild. "The shock would not be good for me."

"I say, who'll write off to Evesham for a pair of water-proofs to put over his shoes? Just give us the measure of your foot, Miss Charlotte?"

"Let's shut him up in a feather-bed!"

"Why, the water's not cold, you donkey!" *cried out* Bill Whitney, who had just leaped in. "*It's* as warm as new milk. What on earth

will you be fit for, Bristles? You'll never make a man."

"Make a man! What are you thinking of, Whitney? Miss Charlotte has no ambition that way. Girls prefer to grow up into young ladies, not into men."

"Is it truly warm?" asked Van Rheyn, gazing at the river irresolutely, and thinking that if he went in the mockery might cease.

I looked up at him from the water. "It is indeed, Van Rheyn. Quite warm."

He knew he might trust me, and began slowly to undress. We had continued to be the best of comrades, and I never went in for teasing him as the rest did; rather shielded him when I could, and took his part.

By the time he was ready to go in—for he did nothing nimbly, and the undoing his buttons made no exception—some of us were ready to come out. One of Dr. Frost's rules in regard to bathing was stringent—that no boy should remain in the water more than three minutes at the very extent. He held that a great deal of harm was done by prolonged bathing. Van Rheyn plunged in—and liked it.

"It is warm and pleasant," he exclaimed. "This cannot hurt me."

"Hurt you, you great baby!" shouted Parker.

Van Rheyn had put his clothes in the tidiest manner upon the grass; not like ours, which *were flung* down any way, waistcoats here, stock-

ings yonder. His things were laid smoothly one upon another, in the order he took them off —the jacket first, the flannel waistcoat uppermost. Though I daresay I should not have noticed this but for a shout from Jessup.

"Halloa! What's that?"

Those of us who were out, and in the several stages of drying or dressing, turned round at the words. Jessup, buttoning his braces, was standing by Van Rheyn's heap, looking down at it. On the top of the flannel singlet, exposed to full view, lay the gold cross with the blue ribbon.

"What on earth *is* it?" cried Jessup, picking it up; and at the moment Van Rheyn, finding all the rest out of the water, came out himself. "Is it a charm?"

"It is mine—it is my gold cross," spoke Van Rheyn, catching up one of the wet towels to rub himself with. The bath this evening had been impromptu, and we had but two towels between us, that Parker and Whitney had brought. In point of fact, it had been against rules also, for we were not expected to go into the river without the presence of a master. But just at this bend it was perfectly safe. Jessup passed the blue ribbon round his neck, letting the cross hang behind. This done, he turned himself about for general inspection, and the boys crowded round to look.

"*What* do you say it is, Bristles?"

"*My* gold cross."

"You don't mean to tell us to our faces that you wear it?"

"I wear it always," freely answered Van Rheyn.

"Jessup took it off his neck, and the boys passed it about from one to another. They did not ridicule the cross—I think the emblem on it prevented that—but they ridiculed Van Rheyn.

"A friend of mine went over to the tar-and-feather islands," said Millichip, executing an aggravating war-dance round about Charley. "He found the natives sporting no end of charms and amulets—nearly all the attire they did sport—rings in the nose and chains in the ears. What relation are those natives to you, Miss Charlotte?"

"Don't injure it, please," pleaded Van Rheyn.

"We've got an ancient nurse at home that carries the tip of a calf's tongue in her pocket for luck," shrieked out Thorne. "And I've heard—I *have* heard, Bristles—that any fellow who arms himself with a pen'orth of blue-stone from the druggist's, couldn't have the yellow jaundice if he tried. What might you wear this for, pray?"

"My Aunt Annette gave it me as a present when she was dying," answered poor helpless Charley, who had never the smallest notion of taking the chaff otherwise than seriously, or of giving chaff back again.

He had dressed himself to his trousers and

shirt, and stood with his hand stretched out, waiting for his cross.

"In the Worcester Journal, one day last June, I read an advertisement as big as a house, offering a child's caul for sale," cried Snepp. "Any gentleman or lady buying that caul and taking it to sea, could never be drowned. Bristles thinks as long as he wears this, he'll not come to be hanged."

"How's your grandmother, Miss Charlotte?"

"I wish you would please to let me alone," said he patiently. "My father would not have placed me here had he known."

"Why don't you write and tell him, Bristles?"

"I would not like to grieve him," simply answered Charley. "I can bear. And he does so much want me to learn the good English."

"This cross is gold, I suppose?" said Bill Whitney, who now had it.

"Yes, it is gold," answered Van Rheyn.

"I'd not advise you to fall amid thieves, then. They might ease you of it. The carving must be worth something."

"It cost a great deal to buy, I have heard my aunt say. Will you be so good as to give it me, that I may finish to dress myself?"

Whitney handed him the cross. Time was up, in fact; and we had to make a race for the house. Van Rheyn was catching it hot and *sharp*, all the way.

One might have thought that his very meek-

ness, the non-resisting spirit in which he took things, would have disarmed the mockery. But it did not. Once go in wholesale for putting upon some particular fellow in a school, and the fun gains with use. I don't think any of them meant to be really unkind to Van Rheyn; but the play had begun, and they enjoyed it.

I once saw him drowned in tears. It was at the dusk of evening. Charley had come in for it awfully at tea-time, I forget what about, and afterwards disappeared. An hour later, going into Whitney's room for something Bill asked me to fetch, I came upon Charles Van Rheyn—who also slept there. He was sitting at the foot of his low bed, his cheek leaning on one of his hands, and the tears running down swiftly. One might have thought his heart was broken.

"What is the grievance, Charley?"

"Do not say to them that you saw me," returned he, dashing away his tears. "I did not expect any of you would come up."

"Look here, old fellow: I know it's rather hard lines for you just now. But they don't mean anything: it is done in sport, not malice. They don't *think*, you see, Van Rheyn. You will be sure to live it down."

"Yes," he sighed, "I hope I shall. But it is so different here from what it used to be. I had the happy home; I never had one sorrow *when my mother* was alive. Nobody cares for

me now; nobody is kind to me: it is a great change."

"Take heart, Charley," I said, holding out my hand. "I know you will live it down in time."

Of all the fellows I ever met, I think he was the most grateful for a word of kindness. As he thanked me with a glad look of hope in his eyes, I saw that he had been holding the cross clasped in his palm; for it dropped as he put his hand into mine.

"It helps me to bear," he said, in a whisper. "My mother, who loved me so, is in Heaven; my father has married Mademoiselle Thérèsine de Tocqueville. I have no one now."

"Your father has not married that Thérèsine de Tocqueville!"

"But, yes. I had the letter close after dinner."

So perhaps he was crying for the home unhappiness as much as for his school grievances. It all reads strange, no doubt, and just the opposite of what might be expected of one of us English boys. The French bringing-up is different from ours: perhaps it lay in that. On the other hand, a French boy, generally speaking, possesses a very shallow sense of religion. But Van Rheyn had been reared by his English mother; and his disposition seemed to be naturally serious and uncommonly pliable and *gentle*. At any rate, whether it reads improbable or probable, it is the truth.

I got what I wanted for Bill Whitney, and went down, thinking what a hard life it was for him—what a shame that we made it so. Indulged, as Van Rheyn must have always been, tenderly treated as a girl, sheltered from the world's roughness, all that coddling must have become to him as second nature; and the remembrance lay with him still. Over here, he was suddenly cut off from it, thrown into another and a rougher atmosphere, isolated from country, home, home-ties, and associations; and compelled to stand the daily brunt of this petty tyranny.

Getting Tod apart that night, I put the matter to him: what a shame it was, and how sorry I felt for Charley Van Rheyn; and I asked him whether he thought he could not (he having a great deal of weight in the school) make things pleasanter for him. Tod responded that I should never be anything but a muff, and that the roasting Van Rheyn got treated to was superlatively good for him, if ever he was to be made into a man.

However, before another week ran out, Dr. Frost interfered. How he obtained an inkling of the reigning politics we never knew. One Saturday afternoon, when old Fontaine had taken Van Rheyn out with him, the Doctor walked into the midst of us, to the general consternation.

Standing in the centre of the schoolroom,

with a solemn face, all of us backing as much as the wall allowed, and those of the masters who chanced to be present rising to their feet, the Doctor spoke of Van Rheyn. He had reason to suspect, he said, that we were doing our best to worry Van Rheyn's life out of him: and he put the question deliberately to us (and made us answer it), how we, if consigned alone to a foreign home, all its inmates strangers, would like to be served so. He did not wish, he went on, to think he had pitiful, ill-disposed boys, lacking hearts and common kindness, in his house: he felt sure that what had passed arose from a heedless love of mischief; and it would greatly oblige him to find from henceforth that our conduct to Van Rheyn was changed: he thought, and hoped, that he had only to express a wish upon the point, to ensure obedience.

With that—and a hearty nod and smile around, as if he put it as a personal favour to himself, and wanted us to see that he did, and was not angry, he went out again. A counsel was held to determine whether we had a sneak among us—else how could Frost have known? —that Charley himself had not spoken, his worst enemy felt sure of. But not one could be pitched upon: every individual fellow, senior and junior, protested earnestly that he had not let out a syllable. And, to tell the truth, I don't think we had.

However, the Doctor was obeyed. From

that day all real annoyance to Charles Van Rheyn ceased. I don't say but what there would be a laugh at him now and then, and a word of raillery, or that he lost his names of Bristles and Miss Charlotte; but virtually the sting was gone. Charley was as grateful as could be, and seemed to become quite happy; and upon the arrival of a hamper by grande vitesse from Rouen, containing a huge rich wedding-cake and some packets of costly sweetmeats, he divided the whole amid us, keeping the merest taste for himself. The school made its comments in return.

"He's not a bad lot after all, that Van Rheyn. He will make a man yet."

"It isn't a bit of use your going in for this, Van Rheyn, unless you can run like a lamplighter."

"But I can run, you know," responded Van Rheyn.

"Yes. But can you keep the pace up?"

"Why not?"

"We may be out for three or four hours, pelting like mad all the time."

"I feel no fear of keeping up," said Van Rheyn. "I will go."

"All right."

It was on a Saturday afternoon; and we were turning out for hare and hounds. The quarter

was hard upon its close, for September was passing. Van Rheyn had never seen hare and hounds: it had been let alone during the hotter weather: and it was Tod who now warned him that he might not be able to keep up the running. It requires fleet legs and easy breath, as everybody knows; and Van Rheyn had never much exercised either.

"What is just the game?" he asked in his quaintly-turned phrase. And I answered him —for Tod had gone away.

"You see those strips of paper that they have torn out of old copy-books, and are twisting? That is for the scent. The hare fills his pockets with it, and drops a piece of it every now and then as he runs. We, the hounds, follow his course by means of the scent, and catch him if we can."

"And then?" questioned Van Rheyn.

"Then the game is over."

"And what if you not catch him?"

"The hare wins; that's all. What he likes to do is to double upon us cunningly and lead us home again after him."

"But in all that there is only running."

"We vault over the obstructions—gates, and stiles, and hedges. Or, if the hedges are too high, scramble through them."

"But some hedges are very thick and close: *nobody* could get through them," debated Van Rheyn, taking the words, as usual, too literally.

"Then we are dished. And have to find some other way onwards, or turn back."

"I can do what you say quite easily."

"All right, Charley," I repeated: as Tod had done. And neither of us, nor anybody else, had the smallest thought that it was not all right.

Millichip was chosen hare. Snepp turned cranky over something or other at the last moment, and backed out of it. He made the best hare in the school: but Millichip was nearly as fleet a runner.

What with making the scent, and having it out with Snepp, time was hindered; and it must have been getting on for four o'clock when we started. Which docked the run considerably, for we had to be in at six to tea. On that account, perhaps, Millichip thought he must get over the ground the quicker; for I don't think we had ever made so swift a course. Letting the hare get on well ahead, the signal was given, and we started after him in full cry, rending the air with shouts, and rushing along like the wind.

A right-down good hare Millichip turned out to be; doubling and twisting and finessing, and exasperating the hounds considerably. About five o'clock he had made tracks for home, as we found by the scent; but we could neither see him nor catch him. Later, I chanced to come to grief in a treacherous ditch, lost my straw hat, and tore the sleeve of my jacket. This threw me behind the rest; and when I pelted

up to the next stile, there stood Van Rheyn. He had halted to rest his arms on it; his breath was coming in alarming gasps, his face whiter than any sheet.

"Halloa, Van Rheyn! What's up! The pace is too much for you."

"It was my breath," said he, when the gasps allowed him to answer. "I go on now."

I put my hand on him. "Look here: the run's nearly over; we shall soon be at home. Don't go on so fast."

"But I want to be in at what they call the death."

"There'll be no death to-day: the hare's safe to win."

"I want to keep up," he answered, getting over the stile. "I said I could keep up, and do what the rest did." And off he was again, full rush.

Before us, on that side of the stile, was a tolerably wide field. The pack had wound half over it during this short halt, making straight for the entrance to the coppice at the other end. We were doing our best to catch them up, when I distinctly saw a heavy stone flung into their midst. Looking at the direction it came from, there crept a dirty raggamuffin over the ground on his hands and knees. He did not see us two behind; and he flung another heavy stone. Had it struck anyone's head it would have done serious damage.

Letting the chase go, I stole across and pounced upon him before he could get away. He twisted himself out of my hands like an eel, and stood grinning defiance and whistling to his dog. We knew the young scamp well: and could never decide whether he was a whole scamp, or a half natural. At any rate, he was vilely bad, was the pest of the neighbourhood, and had enjoyed some short sojourns in prison for trespass. Raddy was the name he went by; we knew him by no other; and how he got a living nobody could tell.

"What did you throw those stones for?"

"Shan't tell ye. Didn't throw 'em at you."

"You had better mind what you are about, Mr. Raddy, unless you want to get into trouble."

"Yah—you!" grinned Raddy.

There was nothing to be made of him; there never was anything. I should have been no match for Raddy in an encounter; and he would have killed me without the slightest compunction. Turning to go on my way, I was in time to see Van Rheyn tumble over the stile and disappear within the coppice. The rest must have nearly shot out of its other end by that time. It was a coppice that belonged to Sir John Whitney. Once through it, we were on our own grounds, and within a field of home.

I went on leisurely enough: no good to try to *catch them* up now. Van Rheyn would not *do it, and he* had more than half a field's start

of me. It must have been close upon six, for the sun was setting in a ball of fire ; the amber sky around it was nearly as dazzling as the sun, and lighted up the field.

So that, plunging into the coppice, it was like going into a dungeon. For a minute or two, with the reflection of that red light lingering in my eyes, I could hardly see the narrow path : the trees were dark, thick, and met overhead. I ran along whistling : wondering whether that young Raddy was after me with his ugly dog ; wondering why Sir John did not——

The whistling and the thoughts came to a summary close together. At the other end of the coppice, but a yard or two on this side the stile that divided it from the open field, there was Charles Van Rheyn on the ground, his back against the trunk of a tree, his arms stretched up, clasping hold of it. But for that clasp, and the laboured breath, I might have thought he was dead. For his face was ghastly to look upon, blue all round the mouth, and wore the strangest expression I ever saw.

"Charley, what's the matter ?"

But he could not answer. He was panting frightfully, as though every gasp would be his last. What on earth was I to do ? Down I knelt, saying never another word.

"It—gives—me—much—hurt," said he, at length, with a long pause between every word.

"What does ?"

"Here"—pointing to his chest—towards the left side.

"Did you hurt yourself?—Did you fall?"

"No, I not hurt myself. I fall because I not able to run more. It is the breath. I wish papa was near me!"

Instinct told me that he must have assistance, and yet I did not like to leave him. But what if delay in getting it should be dangerous? I rose up to go.

"You—you not going to quit me!" he cried out, putting his feeble grasp on my arm.

"But, Charley, I want to get somebody to you," I said in an agony. "I can't do anything for you myself: anything in the world."

"No, you stay. I not like to be alone if I die."

The shock the word gave me I can recall yet. Die! If there was any fear of *that*, it was all the more necessary I should make a rush for Dr. Frost and Featherston. Never had I been so near my wit's end before, in the uncertainty as to what course I ought to take.

All in a moment, there arose a shrill whistle on the other side the stile. It was like a god-send. I knew it quite well for that vicious young reptile's, but it was welcome to me as sunshine in harvest.

"There's Raddy, Van Rheyn. I will send him."

Vaulting over the stile, I saw the young man

standing with his back to me near the hedge, his wretched outer garment—a sack without shape—hitched up, his hands in the pockets of his dilapidated trousers, that hung in fringes below the knee. He was whistling to his dog in the coppice. They must have struck through the tangles and briars higher up, which was a feat of difficulty, and strictly forbidden by law. It was well Sir John's agent did not see Mr. Raddy—whose eyes, scratched and bleeding, gave ample proof of the trespass.

"Yah!—yah!" he shrieked out, turning at the sound of me, and grinning fresh defiance.

"Raddy," I said, speaking in a persuasive tone to propitiate him in my great need, "I want you to do something for me. Go to Dr. Frost as quickly as you are able, and say——"

Of all the derisive horrible laughs, his interrupting one was the worst and loudest. It drowned the words.

"One of the school has fallen and hurt himself," I said, putting it in that way. "He's lying here, and I cannot leave him. Hush, Raddy! I want to tell you,"—advancing a step or two nearer to him and lowering my voice to a whisper,—"I think he is dying."

"None o' yer gammon here; none o' yer lies"—and in proportion as I advanced, he retreated. "You've got a ambush in that there coppy—all the spicy lot on ye a-waiting to be

down on me and serve me out! Just you try it on!"

"I am telling you the truth, Raddy. There's not a soul in there but the one I speak of. I say I fear he is dying. He is lying down helpless. I will pay you to go"—feeling in my pockets to see how much I had there.

Raddy displayed his teeth: it was a trick of his when feeling particularly defiant. "What'll yer pay me?"

"Sixpence"—showing it to him. "I will give it you when you have taken the message."

"Give it first."

Just for a moment I hesitated in my extremity of need, but I knew it would be only the sixpence thrown away. Paid beforehand, Raddy would no more do the errand than he'd fly. I told him as much.

"Then, be dashed if I go!" And he passed off into a round of swearing.

Good heavens! if I should not be able to persuade him! If Charles Van Rheyn should die for lack of help!

"Did you ever have anybody to care for, Raddy? Did you ever have a mother?"

"Her's sent over the seas, her is; and I be glad on't. Her beated of me, her did: I warn't a-going to stand that."

"If you ever had anybody you cared for the least bit in the world, Raddy; if you ever did anybody a good turn in all your life, you will

help this poor fellow now. Come and look at him. See whether I dare leave him."

"None o' yer swindles! Ye wants to get me in there, ye does. Yah! I warn't borned yesterday."

Well, it seemed hopeless. "Will you go for the sixpence, if I give it to you beforehand, Raddy?"

"Give it over, and see. Where the thunder have ye been?" dealing his dog a savage kick, as it came up, barking. "Be I to whistle ye all day, d'ye think?" Another kick.

I had found two sixpences in my pocket; all its store. Bringing forth one, I held it out to him.

"Now listen, Raddy. I give you this sixpence now. You are to run with all your might to the house—and you can run, you know, like the wind. Say that I sent you—you know my name, Johnny Ludlow—sent you to tell them that the French boy is in the coppice dying:" for I thought it best to put it strong. "Dr. Frost, or some of them, must come to him at once, and they must send off for Mr. Featherston. You can remember that. The French boy, mind."

"I could remember it if I tried."

"Well, I'll give you the sixpence. And, look here—here's another sixpence. It is all the money I have. That shall be yours also, when you have done the errand."

I slipped one of the sixpences back into my pocket, holding out the other. But I have often wondered since that he did not stun me with a blow, and take the two. Perhaps he could not entirely divest himself of that idea of the "ambush." I did not like the leering look on his false face as he sidled cautiously up towards the sixpence.

"Take a look at him; you can see him from the stile," I said, closing my hand over the sixpence while I spoke; "convince yourself that he is there, and that no trickery is meant. And, Raddy," I added, slowly opening the hand again, "perhaps you may want help one of these days yourself in some desperate need. Do this good turn for him, and the like will be done for you."

I tossed him the sixpence. He stole cautiously to the stile, making a wide circuit round me to do it, glanced at Van Rheyn, and then made straight off in the right direction as fast as his legs would carry him, the dog barking at his heels.

Van Rheyn was better when I got back to him; his breathing easier, the mouth less blue; and his arms were no longer up, clutching the tree-trunk. Nevertheless, there was that in his face that gave me an awful fear and made my breath for a moment nearly as short as his. I sat down beside him, letting him lean against me, as well as the tree, for better support.

"Are you afraid, Charley? I hope they'll not be long."

"I am not afraid with this," he answered with a happy smile—and, opening his hand, I saw the little cross clasped in it.

Well, that nearly did for me. It was as though he meant to imply he knew he was dying, and was not afraid to die. And he did mean it.

"You not comprehend?" he added, mistaking the look of my face—which no doubt was desperate. "I have kept the Saviour with me here, and he will keep me with Him there."

"Oh——but Charley! You *can't* think you are going to die."

"Yes, I feel so," he answered quite calmly. "My mother said, that last Sunday, I might not be long after her. She drew me close to her, and held my hand, and her tears were falling with mine. It was then she said it."

"Oh, Charley! how can I help you?" I cried out in my pain and dread. "If I could but do something for you!"

"I would like to give you this," he said, half opening his hand again, as it rested on his breast, just to show me the cross. "My mother has seen how good you have always been for me: she said she should look down, if permitted, to watch for me till I came. Would you please keep it to my memory?"

The hardest task I'd ever had in my life was

to sit there. To sit there quietly—helpless. Dying! And I could do nothing to stay him! Oh, why did they not come? If I could but have run somewhere, or done something!

In a case like this the minutes seem as long as hours. Dr. Frost was up sooner than could have been hoped for by the watch, and Featherston with him. Raddy did his errand well. Chancing to see the surgeon pass down the road as he was delivering the message at the house, he ran and arrested him. Putting his ill-looking face over the stile, as they came up, I flung him the other sixpence, and thanked him too. The French master came running; others came: I hardly saw who they were, for my eyes were troubled.

The first thing that Featherston did was to open Van Rheyn's things at the throat, spread a coat on the ground and put his head flat down upon it. But oh, there could be no mistake. He was dying: nearly gone. Dr. Frost knelt down, the better to get at him, and said something that we did not catch.

"Thank you, sir," answered Van Rheyn, panting again and speaking with pain, but smiling faintly his grateful smile. "Do not be sorrowful. I shall see my mother. Sir—if you please—I wish to give my cross to Johnny Ludlow."

Dr. Frost only nodded in answer. His heart must have been full.

"Johnny Ludlow has been always good for me," he went on in his translated French. "He will guard it to my memory: a keepsake. My mother would give it to him—she has seen that Johnny has stood by me ever since that first day."

Monsieur Fontaine spoke to him in French, and Van Rheyn answered in the same language. While giving a fond message for his father, his voice grew feeble, his face more blue, and the lids slowly closed over his eyes. Dr. Frost said something about removing him to the house, but Featherston shook his head. "Presently, presently."

"Adieu, sir," said Van Rheyn faintly to Dr. Frost, and partly opening his eyes again. "Adieu Monsieur Fontaine. Adieu, all. Johnny, say my very best adieux to the boys; say to them it has been very pleasant lately; say they have been very good comrades; and say that I shall see them all again when they come to Heaven. Will you hold my hand?"

Taking his left hand in mine—the other had the gold cross in it—I sat on beside him. The dusk was increasing, so that we could no longer very well see his features in the dark coppice. My tears were dropping fast and thick, just as his tears had dropped that evening when I found him sitting at the foot of his bed.

Well, it was over directly. He gave one *long* deep sigh, and then another after an interval, and all was over. It seemed like a dream

then in the acting; it seems, looking back, like a dream now.

He had died from the running at Hare and Hounds. The violent exercise had been too much for the heart. We heard later that the French family doctor had suspected the heart was not quite sound; and that was the reason of Monsieur Rheyn's written restrictions on the score of violent exercise. But, as Dr. Frost angrily observed, why did the father not distinctly warn him against that special danger: how was it to be suspected in a lad of hearty and healthy appearance? Monsieur Van Rheyn came over, and took what remained of Charles back to Rouen, to be laid beside his late wife. It was a great blow to him to lose his only son. And all the property went away from the Van Rheyn family to Mrs. Scott in India.

The school went into a state that night, when we got in from the coppice, and I gave them Van Rheyn's message. They knew something was up with him, but never suspected it could be death.

"I say, though," cried Harry Parker, in a great access of remorse, speaking up amid the general consternation, "we would never have worried him had we foreseen this. Poor Van Rheyn!"

And I have his gold cross by me this day. Sometimes, when looking at it, a fancy comes over me that he, looking down from his abode of peace in Heaven, sees it too.

VIII.

MRS. TODHETLEY'S EARRINGS.

AGAIN we had been spending the Christmas at Crabb Cot. It was January weather, cold and bright, the sun above head and the white snow on the ground. Mrs. Todhetley had been over to Timberdale Court, to the christening of Robert and Jane Ashton's baby : a year had gone by since their marriage. The Mater went to represent Mrs. Coney, who was godmother. Jane was not strong enough to sit out a christening dinner, and that was to be given later. After some midday feasting, the party dispersed.

I went out to help Mrs. Todhetley from the carriage when she got back. The Squire was at Pershore for the day. It was only three o'clock, and the sun quite warm in spite of the snow.

"It is so fine, Johnny, that I think I'll walk to the school," she said as she stepped down. "It may not be like this to-morrow, and I must *see about* those shirts."

The parish school was making Tod a set of new shirts; and some bother had arisen about them. Orders had been given for large plaits in front, when Tod suddenly announced that he'd have the plaits small.

"Only——can I go as I am?" cried Mrs. Todhetley, suddenly stopping in indecision, as she remembered her fine clothes: a silver-grey gown that shone like silver, white shawl of china crape, and be-feathered bonnet.

"Why, yes, of course you can go as you are, good mother. And look all the nicer for it."

"I fear the children will stare! But then—if the shirts get made wrong! Well, will you go with me, Johnny?"

We reached the school-house, I waiting outside while she went in. It was during that time of strike that I have told of before, when Eliza Hoar died of it. The strike was in full swing still; the men looked discontented, the women miserable, the children pinched.

"I don't know what in the world Joseph will say!" cried Mrs. Todhetley as we were walking back. "Two of the shirts are finished with the large plaits. I ought to have seen about it earlier; but I did not think they would begin them quite so soon.——We'll just step into Mrs. Coney's, Johnny, as we go home. I must tell her about the christening."

For Mrs. Coney was a prisoner from an attack of rheumatism. It had kept her from

the festivity. She was asleep, however, when we got in: and Mr. Coney thought she had better not be disturbed, even for the news of the little grandson's christening, as she had lain awake all the past night in pain; so we left again.

"Why, Johnny! who's that?"

Leaning against the gate of our house, in the red light of the setting sun, was an elderly woman, dark as a gipsy.

"A tramp," I whispered, noticing her poor clothes.

"Do you want anything, my good woman?" asked Mrs. Todhetley.

She was half kneeling in the snow, and lifted her face at the words: a sickly face, that somehow I liked now I saw it close. Her tale was this. She had set out from her home, three miles off, to walk to Worcester, word having been sent her that her daughter, who was in service there, had met with an accident. She had not been strong of late, and a faintness came over her as she was passing the gate. But for leaning on it she must have fallen.

"You should go by train: you should not walk," said Mrs. Todhetley.

"I had not the money just by me, ma'am," she answered. "It 'ud cost two shillings or half-a-crown. My daughter sent word I was to take the train and she'd pay for it: but she did

not send the money, and I'd not got it just handy."

"You live at Islip, you say. What is your name?"

"Nutt'n, ma'am," said the woman in the local dialect. Which name I interpreted into Nutten; but Mrs. Todhetley thought she said Nutt.

"I think you are telling me the truth," said the Mater, some hesitation in her voice, though. "If I were assured of it I would advance you half-a-crown for the journey."

"The good Lord above us knows that I'm telling it," returned the woman earnestly, turning her face full to the glow of the sun. "It's more than I could expect you to do, ma'am, and me a stranger; but I'd repay it faithfully."

Well, the upshot was that she got the half-crown lent her; and I ran in for a sup of warm ale. Molly shrieked out at me for it, refusing to believe that the mistress gave any such order, and saying she was not going to warm ale for parish tramps. So I got the ale and the tin, and warmed it myself. The woman was very grateful, drank it, and disappeared.

"Joseph, I am so very sorry! They have made two of your shirts, and the plaits are the large ones you say you don't like."

"Then they'll just unmake them," retorted Tod, in a temper.

We were sitting round the table at tea, Mrs.

Todhetley having ordered some tea to be made while she went upstairs. She came down without her bonnet, and had changed her best gown for the one she mostly wore at home: it had two shades in it, and shone like the copper tea-kettle. The Squire was not expected home yet, and we were to dine an hour later than usual.

"That Miss Timmens is not worth her salt," fired Tod, helping himself to two slices of thin bread-and-butter. "What business has she to go and make my shirts wrong?"

"I fear the fault lies with me, Joseph, not with Miss Timmens. I had given her the pattern shirt, which has large plaits, you know, before you said you would prefer——oh, we hardly want the lamp yet, Thomas!" broke off the Mater, as old Thomas came in with the lighted lamp.

"I'm sure we do, then," cried Tod. "I can't see which side's the butter and which the bread."

"And I, not thinking Miss Timmens would put them in hand at once, did not send to her as soon as you spoke, Joseph," went on the Mater, as Thomas settled the lamp on the table and its light went gleaming around. "I am very sorry, my dear; but it is only two. The rest shall be done as you wish."

Something, apart from the shirts, had put out Tod. I had seen it as soon as we got in. For *one* thing, he had meant to go to Pershore: and

the Pater, not knowing it, started without him.

"Let them unmake the two," growled Tod.

"But it would be a great pity, Joseph. They are very nicely done; the stitching 's beautiful. I really don't think it will signify."

"*You* don't, perhaps. You may like odd things. A pig with one ear, for example."

"A what, Joseph?" she asked, not catching the last simile.

"I said a pig with one ear. No doubt you do like it. You are looking like one now, ma'am."

The words made me gaze at Mrs. Todhetley, for the tone told that they bore some personal meaning, and then I saw what Tod meant: an earring was absent. The lamp-light shone on the flashing diamonds, the bright pink topaz of the one earring; but the other ear was bare and empty.

"You have lost one of your earrings, mother?"

She clapped her hand on her two ears in succession, and started up in alarm. These earrings were very valuable: they had been left to her, when she was a child, in some old lady's will, and constituted her chief possession in jewellery worth boasting of. Not once in a twelvemonth did she venture to put them on; but she had got them out to-day for the christening.

Whether it was that I had gazed at the earrings when I was a little fellow and sat in

her lap, I don't know; but I never saw any that I liked so well. The pink topaz was in a long drop, the slender rim of gold that encircled it being set with diamonds. Mrs. Todhetley said they were worth fifty guineas: and perhaps they were. The glittering white of the diamonds round the gleaming pink was beautiful to look upon.

The house went into a commotion. Mrs. Todhetley made for her bedroom, to see whether the earring had dropped on the floor or was lodging inside her bonnet. She shook out her grey dress, hoping it had fallen amid the folds. Hannah searched the stairs, candle in hand; the two children were made to stand in corners for fear they should tread on it. But the search came to nothing. It seemed clear enough that the earring was not in the house.

"Did you notice, Johnny, whether I had them both in my ears when we went to the school?" the Mater asked.

No, I did not. I had seen them sparkling when she got out of the carriage, but had not noticed them after.

I went out to search the garden path that she had traversed, and the road over to the Coneys' farm. Tod helped me, forgetting his shirts and his temper. Old Coney said he remarked the earrings while Mrs. Todhetley was talking to *him,* and thought how beautiful they were. *That is,* he had remarked *one* of them; he was

sure of that; and he thought if the other had been missing, its absence would have struck him. But that was just saying nothing; for he could not be certain that both were there.

"You may hunt till to-morrow morning and get ten lanterns to it," cried Molly in her tart way, meeting us by the bay tree, as we went stooping up the path again; "but you'll be none the nearer finding it. That tramp's got the earring, Master Joe."

"What tramp?" demanded Tod, straightening himself.

"A tramp that Master Johnny there must needs give hot ale to," returned Molly. "*I* know what them tramps be worth. They'd pull rings out of ears with their own fingers, give 'em the chance: and perhaps this woman did, without the missis seeing her."

Tod turned to me for an explanation. I gave it, and he burst into a derisive laugh, meant for me and the Mater. "To think we could be taken in by such a tale as that!" he cried: "we should never see tramp, or half-crown, or perhaps the earring again."

The Squire came home in the midst of the stir. He blustered a little, partly at the loss, chiefly at the encouragement of tramps, calling it astounding folly. Ordering Thomas to bring a lantern, he went stooping his old back down the path, and across to Coney's and back again;

not believing anybody had searched properly, and finely kicking the snow about.

"It's a pity this here snow's on the ground, sir," cried Thomas. "A little thing like an earring might easily slip into it in falling."

"Not a bit of it," growled the Squire. "That tramp has got the earring."

"I don't believe the tramp has," I stoutly said. "I don't think she was a tramp at all: and she seemed honest. I liked her face."

"There goes Johnny with his 'faces' again!" said the Squire in laughing mockery; and Tod echoed it.

"It's a good thing you don't have to buy folks by their faces, Johnny: you'd get finely sold sometimes."

"And she had a true voice," I persisted, not choosing to be put down, also thinking it right to assert what was my conviction. "A voice you might trust without as much as looking at herself."

Well, the earring was not to be found; though the search continued more or less till bed-time, for every other minute somebody would be looking again on the carpets.

"It is not so much for the value I regret it," spoke Mrs. Todhetley, the tears rising in her meek eyes; "as for the old associations connected with it. I never got the earrings out, but they brought back to me the remembrance of my girlhood's home."

Early in the morning I ran down to the school-house. More snow had fallen in the night. The children were flocking in. Miss Timmens had not noticed the earrings at all, but several of the girls said they had. Strange to say, though, most of them could not say for certain whether they saw *both* the earrings: they thought they did; but there it ended. Just like old Coney!

"I am sure both of them were there," spoke up a nice, clean little girl, from a back form.

"What's that, Fanny Fairfax?" cried out Miss Timmens, in her quick way. "Stand up. How are you sure of it?"

"Please, governess, I saw them both," was the answer; and the child blushed like a peony as she stood up above the others and said it.

"Are you sure you did?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure, please, governess. I was looking which o' the two shined the most. 'Twas when the lady was stooping over the shirt, and the sun came in at the window."

"What did they look like?" asked Miss Timmens.

"They looked——" and there the young speaker came to a standstill.

"Come, Fanny Fairfax!" cried Miss Timmens, sharply. "What d' you stop for? I ask you what the earrings looked like. You must be able to tell if you saw them."

"They were red, please, governess, and had

shining things round them like the ice when it glitters."

"She's right, Master Johnny," nodded Miss Timmens to me: "and she's a very correct child in general. I think she must have seen both of them."

I ran home with the news. They were at breakfast still.

"What a set of muffs the children must be, not to have taken better notice!" cried Tod. "Why, when I saw only the one earring in, it struck my eye at once."

"And for that reason it is nearly sure that both of them were in at the school-house," I rejoined. "The children did not particularly observe the two, but they would have remarked it directly had only one been in. Old Coney said the same."

"Ay: it's that tramp that has got it," said the Squire. "While your mother was talking to her, it must have slipped out of the ear, and she managed to secure it. Those tramps lay their hands on anything; nothing comes amiss to them; they are as bad as gipsies. I dare say this was a gipsy—dark as she was. I'll be off to Worcester and see the police: we'll soon have *her* found. You had better come with me, Johnny; you'll be able to describe her."

We went off without delay, caught a passing train, and were soon at Worcester and at the police-station. The Squire asked for Sergeant

Cripp: who came to him, and prepared to listen to his tale.

He began it in his impulsive way; saying outright that the earring had been stolen by a gipsy-tramp. I tried to say that it might have been only lost, but the Pater scoffed at that, and told me to hold my tongue.

"And now, Cripp, what's to be done?" he demanded, not having given the sergeant an opportunity to put in a word edgeways. "We must get the earring back; it is of great value, and much prized, apart from that, by Mrs. Todhetley. The woman must be found, you know."

"Yes, she must be found," agreed the sergeant. "Can you give me a description of her?"

"Johnny—this young gentleman can," said the Squire, rubbing his brow with his yellow silk handkerchief, for he had put himself into a heat, in spite of the frosty atmosphere that surrounded us. "He was with Mrs. Todhetley when she talked to the woman."

"A thin woman of middle height, stooped a good deal, face pale and quiet, wrinkles on it, brown eyes," wrote the sergeant, taking down what I said. "Black poke bonnet, clean cap border, old red woollen shawl with the fringe torn off in places. Can't remember gown; except that it was dark and shabby."

"And, of course, sir, you've no clue to her name?" cried the sergeant, looking at me.

"Yes; she said it was Nutten—as I under-

stood it; but Mrs. Todhetley thought she said Nutt." And I went on to relate the tale the woman told. Sergeant Cripp's lips extended themselves in a silent smile.

"'Twas well got up, that tale," said he, when I finished. "Just the thing to win over a warm-hearted lady."

"But she could not have halted at the gate, expecting to steal the earring?"

"Of course not. She was prowling about to see what she could steal, perhaps watching her opportunity to get into the house. The earring fell in her way, a more valuable prize than she expected, and she made off with it.

"You'll be able to hunt her up if she's in Worcester, Cripp," put in the Pater. "Don't lose time."

"*If* she's in Worcester," returned Mr. Cripp, with emphasis. "She's about as likely to be in Worcester, Squire Todhetley, as I am to be at this present minute in Brummagem," he familiarly added. "After saying she was coming to Worcester, she'd strike off in the most opposite direction to it."

"Where on earth are we to look for her, then?" asked the Pater in commotion.

"Leave it to us, Squire. We'll try and track her. And—I hope—get back the earring."

"And about the advertisement for the newspapers, Cripp: we ought to put one in."

Sergeant Cripp twirled the pen in his fingers while he reflected. "I think, sir, we will let the

advertisement alone for a day or two," he presently said. "Sometimes these advertisements do more harm than good: they put thieves on their guard."

"Do they? Well, I suppose they do."

"If the earring had been simply lost, then I should send an advertisement to the papers at once. But if it has been stolen by this tramp, and you appear to consider that point pretty conclusive——"

"Oh, quite conclusive," interrupted the Pater. "She has got that earring as sure as that this is an umbrella in Johnny Ludlow's hand. Had it been dropped anywhere on the ground, we must have found it."

"Then we won't advertise it. At least, not in to-morrow's papers," concluded Sergeant Cripp. And, telling us to leave the matter entirely in his hands, he showed us out.

The Squire went up the street with his hands in his pockets, looking rather glum.

"I'm not sure that he's right about the advertisement, Johnny," he said at length. "I lay awake last night in bed, making up the wording of it in my own mind. Perhaps he knows best, though."

"I suppose he does, sir."

And he went on again, up one street, and down another, deep in thought.

"*Let's see*—we have nothing to do here to-*day, have* we, Johnny?"

"Except to get the pills made up. The mother said we were to be sure and not forget them."

"Oh, ay. And that's all the way down in Sidbury! Couldn't we as well get them made up by a druggist nearer?"

"But it is the Sidbury druggist who holds the prescription."

"What a bother! Well, lad, let us put our best foot foremost, for I want to catch the one o'clock train, if I can."

Barely had we reached Sidbury, when who should come swinging along the pavement but old Coney, in a rough, white great-coat and top-boots. Not being market-day, we were surprised to see him.

"I had to come in about some oats," he explained. And then the Squire told him of our visit to the police, and the sergeant's opinion about the advertisement.

"Cripp's wrong," said Coney, decisively. "Not advertise the earring!—why, it is the first step that ought to be taken."

"Well, so I thought," said the Pater.

"The thing's not obliged to have been stolen, Squire: it may have been dropped out of the ear in the road, and picked up by somebody. The offering of a reward might bring it back again."

"And I'll be shot if I don't do it," exclaimed the Pater. "I can see as far through a millstone as Cripp can."

Turning in to the Hare-and-Hounds, which was old Coney's inn, they sat down at a table, called for pen and ink, and began to draw out an advertisement between them. "Lost! An earring of great value, pink topaz and diamonds," wrote the Squire on a leaf of his pocket-book; and when he had got as far as that he looked up.

"Johnny, you go over to Eaton's for a sheet or two of writing-paper. We'll have it in all three of the newspapers. And look here, lad—you can run for the pills at the same time. Take care of the street slides. I nearly came down on one just now, you know."

When I got back with the paper and pills, the advertisement was finished. It concluded with an offer of £5 reward. Applications to be made to Mr. Sergeant Cripp, or to Squire Todhetley of Crabb Cot. And, leaving it at the offices of the *Herald*, *Journal*, and *Chronicle*, we returned home. It would appear on the next day, Saturday; to the edification, no doubt, of Sergeant Cripp.

"Any news of the earring?" was the Squire's first question when we got in.

No, there was no news of it, Mrs. Todhetley answered. And she had sent Luke Macintosh over to the little hamlet, Islip; who reported when he came back that there was no Mrs. Nutt, or Nutten, known there.

"Just what I expected," observed the Patex.

"That woman was a thieving tramp, and she has got the earring."

Saturday passed over, and Sunday came. When the Worcester paper arrived on Saturday morning the advertisement was in it as large as life, and the Pater read it out to us. Friday and Saturday had been very dull, with storms of snow; on Sunday the sun shone again, and the air was crisp.

It was about three o'clock, and we were sitting at the dessert-table cracking filberts, for on Sundays we always dined early, after morning service—when Thomas came in and said a stranger had called, and was asking if he could see Mrs. Todhetley. But the Mater, putting a shawl over her head and cap, had just stepped over to sit a bit with sick Mrs. Coney.

"Who is it, Thomas?" asked the Squire. "A stranger! Tell him to send his name in."

"His name's Eccles, sir," said Thomas, coming back again. "He comes, he says, from Sergeant Cripp."

"My goodness!—it must be about the earring," cried the Squire.

"That it is, sir," said old Thomas. "The first word he put to me was an inquiry whether you had heard news of it."

I followed the Pater into the study. Tod did not leave his filberts. Standing by the fire was a tall, well-dressed man, with a black moustache and blue silk necktie. I think the Squire was a little taken back at the fashionable appearance of the visitor. He had expected to see an ordinary policeman.

"Have you brought tidings of Mrs. Todhetley's earring?" began the Pater, all in a fluster of eagerness.

"I beg a thousand pardons for intruding upon you on a Sunday," returned the stranger, cool and calm as a spring cucumber, "but the loss of an hour is sometimes most critical in these cases. I have the honour, I believe, of speaking to Squire Todhetley?"

The Squire nodded. "Am I mistaken in supposing that you come about the earring?" he reiterated. "I understood my servant to mention Sergeant Cripp. But—you do not, I presume, belong to the police force?"

"Only as a detective officer," was the answer, given with a taking smile. "A *private* officer," he added, putting a stress upon the word. "My name is Eccles."

"Take a seat, Mr. Eccles," said the Squire, sitting down himself, while I stood back by the window. "I do hope you have brought tidings of the earring."

"Yes—and no," replied Mr. Eccles, with another fascinating smile, as he unbuttoned his

top-coat. "We think we have traced it; but we cannot yet be sure."

"And where is it?—who has got it?" cried the Squire, eagerly.

"It is a very delicate matter, and requires delicate handling," observed the detective, after a slight pause. "For that reason I have come over to-day myself. Cripp did not choose to entrust it to one of his men."

"I am sure I am much obliged to him, and to you too," said the Squire, all his face beaming. "Where is the earring?"

"Before I answer that question, will you be so kind as to relate to me, in a few concise words, the precise circumstances under which the earring was lost?"

The Pater entered on the story, and I helped him. Mr. Eccles listened attentively.

"Exactly so," said he, when it was over. "Those are the facts Cripp gave me; but it was only second-hand, you see, and I preferred to hear them direct from yourselves. They serve to confirm our suspicion."

"But where is the earring?" repeated the Pater.

"If it is where we believe it to be, it is in a gentleman's house at Worcester. At least, he may be called a gentleman. He is a professional man: a lawyer, in fact. But I may not name names in the present stage of the affair."

"And how did the earring get into his house?" pursued the Squire, all aglow with interest.

"News reached us last evening," began Mr. Eccles, after searching in his pockets for something that he apparently could not find: perhaps a note-case—"reached us in a very singular way, too—that this gentleman had been making a small purchase of jewellery in the course of yesterday; had been making it in private, and did not wish it talked of. A travelling pedlar—that was the description we received—had come in contact with him and offered him an article for sale, which he, after some haggling, purchased. By dint of questioning, we discovered this article to be an earring: one earring, not a pair. Naturally Mr. Cripp's suspicion was at once aroused; he thought it might be the very self-same earring that you have lost. We consulted together, and the result is, I decided to come over and see you."

"I'd lay all I've got it is the earring!" exclaimed the Squire, in excitement. "The travelling pedlar that sold it must have been that woman tramp."

"Well, no," returned the detective, quietly. "It was a man. Her husband, perhaps; or some confederate of hers."

"No doubt of that! And how can we get back the earring?"

"We shall get it, sir, never fear; if it be the earring you have lost. But, as I have just

observed, it is a matter that will require extreme delicacy and caution in the handling. First of all, we must assure ourselves beyond doubt that the earring *is* the one in question. To take any steps upon an uncertainty would not do: this gentleman might turn round upon us unpleasantly."

"Well, let him!" cried the Squire.

The visitor smiled his candid smile again, and shook his head. "For instance, if, after taking means to obtain possession of the earring, we found it to be coral set with pearls, or opal set with emeralds, instead of a pink topaz with diamonds, we should not only look foolish ourselves, but draw down upon us the wrath of the present possessor."

"Is he a respectable man?" asked the Pater. "I know most of the lawyers——'

"He stands high enough in the estimation of the town, but I have known him do some very dirty actions in his profession," interrupted Mr. Eccles, speaking rapidly. "With a man like him to deal with, we must necessarily be wary."

"Then, what are you going to do?"

"The first step, Squire Todhetley, is to make ourselves sure that the earring is the one we are in quest of. With this view, I am here to request Mrs. Todhetley to allow me to see the fellow earring. Cripp has organized a plan by *which* he believes we can get to see the one I

have been telling you of; but it will be of no use our seeing it unless we can identify it."

"Of course not. By all means. Johnny, go over and ask your mother to come in," added the Squire, eagerly. "I'm sure I don't know where she keeps her things, and might look in her places for ever without finding it.—Meanwhile, Mr. Eccles, can I offer you some refreshment? We have just dined off a beautiful sirloin of beef: it's partly cold now, but perhaps you won't mind that."

Mr. Eccles said he would take a little, as the Squire was so good as to offer it, for he had come off by the first train after morning service, and so lost his dinner. Taking my hat, I dashed open the dining-room door in passing. Tod was at the nuts still, Hugh and Lena on either side him.

"I say, Tod, do you want to see a real live detective? There's one in the study."

Who should be seated in the Coneys' drawing-room, her bonnet and shawl on, and her veil nearly hiding her sad face, but Lucy Bird—Lucy Ashton that used to be. It always gave me a turn when I saw her: bringing up all kinds of ugly sorrows and troubles. I shook hands, and asked after Captain Bird.

She believed he was very well, she said, but she had been spending the time since yesterday at Timberdale Court with Robert and Jane. To-day she had been dining with the Coneys—

who were always kind to her, she added with a rising sigh—and she was now about to go off to the station to take the train for Worcester.

The Mater was in Mrs. Coney's bedroom with old Coney and Cole the doctor, who was paying his daily visit. One might have thought they were settling all the cases of rheumatism in the parish by the time they took over it. While I waited, I told Mrs. Bird about the earring and the present visit of Detective Eccles. Mrs. Todhetley came down in the midst of it; and lifted her hands at the prospect of facing a detective.

"Dear me! Is he anything dreadful to look at, Johnny? Very rough?—Has he got handcuffs?"

It made me laugh. "He is a regular good-looking fellow—a gentleman. Tall and slender and well dressed: gold studs and a blue necktie. He has a ring on his finger and wears a black moustache."

Mrs. Bird suddenly lifted her head, and stared at me: perhaps the description surprised her. The Mater seemed inclined to question my words; but she said nothing, and came away, after bidding good-bye to Lucy.

"Keep up your heart, my dear," she whispered. "Things may get brighter for you sometime."

When I got back, Mr. Eccles had nearly finished the sirloin, some cheese, and a large *tankard* of ale. The Squire sat by, hospitably

pressing him to take more, whenever his knife and fork gave signs of flagging. Tod stood looking on, his back against the mantelpiece. Mrs. Todhetley soon appeared with a little cardboard box, where the solitary earring was lying on a bed of cotton.

Rising from the table, the detective carried the box to the window, and stood there examining the earring; first in the box, then out of it. He turned it about in his hand, and looked at it on all sides; it took him a good three minutes.

"Madam," said he, breaking the silence, "will you entrust this earring to us for a day or two? It will be under Sergeant Cripp's charge, and perfectly safe."

"Of course, of course," interposed the Squire, before anybody could speak. "You are welcome to take it."

"You see, it is possible—indeed, most probable—that only one of us may be able to obtain sight of the other earring. Should it be Cripp, my having seen this one will be nearly useless to him. It is essential that he should see it also: and it will not do to waste time."

"Pray take charge of it, sir," said Mrs. Todhetley, mentally recalling what I had said of his errand to her and Lucy Bird. "I know it will be safe in your hands and Sergeant Cripp's. I am only too glad that there is a probability of the other one being found."

"And look here," added the Squire to Eccles, while the latter carefully wrapped the box in paper, and put it into his inner breast-pocket, "don't you and Cripp let that confounded gipsy thief escape. Have her up and punish her."

"Trust us for that," was the detective's answer, given with an emphatic nod. "*She is already as good as taken*, and her confederate also. There's not a doubt—I avow it to you—that the other earring is yours. We only wait to verify it."

And, with that, he buttoned his coat, and bowed himself out, the Squire himself attending him to the door.

"He is as much like a detective as I'm like a Dutchman," commented Tod. "At least, according to what have been all my previous notions of one. Live and learn."

"He seems quite a polished man, has quite the manners of society," added the Mater. "I do hope he will get back my poor earring,"

"Mother, is Lucy Bird in more trouble than usual?" I asked.

"She is no doubt in deep distress of some kind, Johnny. But she is never out of it. I wish Robert Ashton could induce her to quit that most worthless husband of hers!"

The Squire, after watching off the visitor, came in, rubbing his hands and looking as delighted as old Punch. He assumed that the

earring was as good as restored, and was immensely taken with Mr. Eccles.

"A most intelligent, superior man," cried he. "I suppose he is what is called a gentleman-detective: he told me he had been to college. I'm sure it seems quite a condescension in him to work with Cripp and the rest."

And the whole of tea-time and all the way to church, the praises were being rung of Mr. Eccles. I'm not sure but that he was more to us that night than the sermon.

"I confess I feel mortified about that woman, though," confessed Mrs. Todhetley. "You heard him say that she was as good as taken: they must have traced the earring to her. I did think she was one to be trusted. How one may be deceived in people!"

"I'd have trusted her with a twenty-pound note, mother."

"Hark at Johnny!" cried Tod. "This will be a lesson for you, lad."

Monday morning. The Squire and Tod had gone over to South Crabb. Mrs. Todhetley sat at the window, adding up some bills, her nose red with the cold: and I was boxing Hugh's ears, for he was in one of his frightfully troublesome moods, when Molly came stealing in at the door, as covertly as if she had been committing murder.

"Ma'am! missis!—there's that tramp in the yard!"

"What?" cried the Mater, turning round.

"I vow it's her: I know the old red shawl again," pursued Molly, with as much importance as though she had caught half the thieves in Christendom. "She turned into the yard as bold as brass; so I just slipped the bolt o' the door again' her, and come away. You'll have her took up on the instant, ma'am, won't you?"

"But if she has come back, I don't think she can be guilty," cried Mrs. Todhetley, after a bewildered pause. "We had better see what she wants. What do you say, Johnny?"

"Why, of course we had. I'll go to her, as Molly's afraid."

Rushing out of hearing of Molly's vindictive answer, I went round through the snow to the yard, and found the woman meekly tapping at the kitchen door—the old red shawl, and the black bonnet, and the white muslin cap border, all the same as before. Before I got quite up, the kitchen door was cautiously drawn open, and Mrs. Todhetley looked out. The poor old woman dropped a curtsey and held out half-a-crown on the palm of her withered hand.

"I've made bold to call at the door to leave it, lady. And I can never thank ye enough, ma'am," she added, the tears rising to her eyes; "my tongue would but fail if I tried at it. 'Tis not many as would ha' trusted a stranger; and,

that, a poor body like me. I got over to Worcester quick and comfortable, ma'am, thanks to you, and found my daughter better nor I had hoped for."

The same feeling of reliance, of trust, arose within me as I saw her face and heard her voice and words. If this woman was what they had been fancying her, I'd never eat tarts again.

"Come in," said Mrs. Todhetley; and Molly, looking daggers as she heard it, approached her mistress with a whisper.

"Don't, ma'am. It's all a laid-out plan. She has heard that she's suspected, and brings back the half-crown, thinking to put us off the scent."

"Step this way," went on Mrs. Todhetley, giving no heed to Molly, except a nod—and she took the woman into the little store-room where she kept her jam-pots and things, and bade her go to the fire.

"What did you tell me your name was," she asked, "when you were here on Friday?"

"Nutt'n, ma'am."

"Nutten," repeated the Mater, glancing at me. "But I sent over to Islip, and no one there knew anything about you—they denied that anybody of your name lived there."

"Why, how could they do that?" returned the woman, with every appearance of surprise. "They must have mistook somehow. I live in the little cottage, ma'am, by the dung-heap. I've lived there for five-and-twenty year, and

brought up my children there, and never had parish pay."

"And gone always by the name of Nutten?"

"Not never by no other, ma'am. Why should I?"

Was she to be believed? There was the half-crown in Mrs. Todhetley's hand, and there was the honest old wrinkled face looking up at us openly. But, on the other side, there was the assertion of the Islip people; and there was the earring.

"What was the matter with your daughter, and in what part of Worcester does she live?" queried the Mater.

"She's second servant to a family in Melcheapen Street, ma'am; minds the children and does the beds, and answers the door, and that. When I got there—and sick enough my heart felt all the way, thinking what the matter could be—I found that she had fell from the parlour window that she'd got outside to clean, and broke her arm and scarred her face, and frighted and shook herself finely. But thankful enough I was that 'twas no worse. Her father, ma'am, died of an accident, and I can never abear to hear tell of one."

"I—I lost an earring out of my ear that afternoon," said Mrs. Todhetley, plunging into the matter, but not without hesitation. "I think I must have lost it just about the time I was *talking* to you. Did you pick it up?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. I should have gave it to you if I had."

"You did not carry it off with you, I suppose!" interrupted wrathful Molly; who had come in to get some eggs, under pretence that the batter-pudding was waiting for them.

And whether it was Molly's sharp and significant tone, or our silence and looks, I don't know; but the woman saw it all then, and what she was suspected of.

"Oh, ma'am, were you thinking that ill of me?"—and the hands shook as they were raised, and the white border seemed to lift itself from the horror-stricken face. "Did you think I could do so ill a turn, and after all the kindness showed me? The good Lord above knows I'm not a thief. Dear heart! I never set eyes, lady, on the thing you've lost."

"No, I am *sure* you didn't," I cried; "I said so all along. It might have dropped anywhere in the road."

"I never see it, nor touched it, sir," she reiterated, the tears raining down her cheeks. "Oh, ma'am, do believe me!"

Molly tossed her head as she went out with the eggs in her apron; but I'd have sooner believed myself guilty than that poor woman. Mrs. Todhetley thought with me. She offered her some warm ale and a crust; but the old woman shook her head in refusal, and went off in a fit of sobs.

"She knows no more of the earring than I know of it, mother."

"I feel sure she does not, Johnny."

"That Molly's getting unbearable. I wonder you don't send her away."

"She has her good points, dear," sighed Mrs. Todhetley. "Only think of her cooking! and of what a thrifty, careful manager she is!"

The Squire and Tod got home for lunch. Nothing could come up to their ridicule when they heard what had occurred, saying that the mother and I were two muffs, fit to go about the world in a caravan as specimens of credulity. Like Molly, they thought we ought to have secured the woman.

"But you see she was honest in the matter of the half-crown," debated Mrs. Todhetley in her mild way. "She brought that back. It does not stand to reason that she would have dared to come within miles of the place, if she had taken the earring."

"Why, it's just the thing she would do," retorted the Squire, pacing about in a commotion. "Once she had got rid of the earring, she'd show herself here to throw suspicion off herself. And she couldn't come without returning the half-crown: it must have gone nicely against the grain to return *that*."

And Mrs. Todhetley, the most easily swayed spirit in the world, began to veer round again like a weathercock, and fear we had been foolish.

"You should see her jagged-out old red-shawl," cried Molly, triumphantly. "All the red a'most washed out of it, and the edges in tatters. *I* know a tramp when I see one: and the worst of all tramps is them that do the tricks with clean hands and snow-white cap-borders."

The theme lasted us all the afternoon. I held my tongue, for it was of no use contending against the stream. It was getting dusk when Cole called in, on his way from the Coneys. The Squire put the grievance before him, demanding whether he had ever heard of two people so simple as I and the mother.

"What did she say her name was?" asked Cole. "Nutten?—of Islip? Are you sure she did not say Norton?"

"She said Nutt'n. We interpreted it into Nutten."

"Yes, Johnny, that's how she would say it. I'll lay a guinea it's old Granny Norton."

"Granny Norton!" echoed the Squire. "She is respectable?"

"Respectable, honest, upright as the day," replied Cole. "I have a great respect for old Mrs. Norton. She's very poor now, but she was not always so."

"She told us this morning that she lived in the cottage by the dung-heap," I put in.

"Exactly; she does so. And a nice savoury

dung-heap it is; the disgrace of Islip," added Cole.

"And you mean to say, Cole, that you know this woman—that she's not a tramp, but Mrs. Norton?" spoke the Pater. "Come!"

"I know Mrs. Norton of Islip," he answered. "I saw her pass my window this morning: she seemed to be coming from the railway station. It was no tramp, Squire."

"How was she dressed?" asked Mrs. Todhetley.

"Dressed? Well, her shawl was red, and her bonnet black. I've never seen her dressed otherwise, when abroad, these ten years past."

"And—has she a daughter in service at Worcester?"

"Yes, I think so.—Yes, I am sure so. It's Susan. Oh, it is the same person: you need not doubt it."

"Then what the deuce did Luke Macintosh mean by bringing word back from Islip that she was not known there?" fiercely demanded the Squire, turning to me.

"But Luke said he asked for her by the name of Nutt—Mrs. Nutt. I questioned him about it this afternoon, sir, and he said he understood Nutt to have been the name we gave him."

This was very unsatisfactory as far as the earring went. (And we ascertained later that poor Mrs. Norton *was* Mrs. Norton, and had *been* suspected wrongly). For, failing the

tramp view of the case, who could have sold the earring to the professional gentleman in Worcester?

"Cripp knows what he is about; never fear," observed the Squire. "Now that he has the case well in hand, he is sure to pull it successfully through."

"Yes, you may trust Cripp, said the doctor. "And I hope, Mrs. Todhetley, you will soon be gladdened by the sight of your earring again." And Cole went out, telling us we were going to have a thaw. Which we could have told him, for it had already set in, and the snow was melting rapidly.

"To think that I should have done so stupid a thing! But I have been so flustered this morning by that parson and his nonsense that I hardly know what I'm about."

The speaker was Miss Timmens. She had come up in a passion, after twelve o'clock school. Not with us, or with her errand—which was to bring one of the new shirts to show, made after Tod's fancy—but with the young parson. Upon arriving and unfolding the said shirt, Miss Timmens found that she had brought the wrong shirt—one of those previously finished. The thaw had gone on so briskly in the night that this morning the roads were all mud and slop, and Miss Timmens had walked up in her pattens.

"He is enough to make a saint swear, with

his absurdities and his rubbish," went on Miss Timmens, turning from the table where lay the unfolded shirt, and speaking of the new parson; between whom and herself waged hot war. "You'd never believe, ma'am, what he did this morning"—facing Mrs. Todhetley. "I had got the spelling-class up, and the rest of the girls were at their slates and copies, and that, when in he walked amid the roomful. 'Miss Timmens,' says he to me in the hearing of 'em all, 'I think these children should learn a little music. And perhaps a little drawing might not come amiss to those who have talent for it.' 'Oh yes, of course,' says I, hardly able to keep my temper, 'and a little dancing as well, and let 'em go out on the green daily and step their figures to a fife and tambourine!' 'There's nothing like education,' he goes on, staring hard at me, as if he hardly knew whether to take my words for jest or earnest; 'and it is well to unite as far as we can, the ornamental with the useful, it makes life pleasanter. It is quite right to teach girls to hem dusters and darn stockings, but I think some fancy-work should be added to it; embroidery and the like.' 'Oh, you great gaby!' I thought to myself, and did but just stop my tongue from saying it. 'Will embroidery and music and drawing help these girls to scour floors, and cook dinners, and wash petticoats?' I asked him. 'If I had a set of young ladies here, it would be right for

them to learn accomplishments: but these girls are to be servants. And all I can say, sir, is, that if ever those new-fangled notions are introduced, you'll have to find another mistress, for I'll not stop to help in it. It would just lead many a girl to her ruin, sir; that's what it would do, whoever lives to see it.' Well, he went away with that, ma'am; but he had put my temper up—talking such dangerous nonsense before the girls, their ears all agape to listen!—and when twelve o'clock struck, I was not half through the spelling-class! Altogether, it's no wonder I brought away the wrong shirt."

Miss Timmens, her errand a failure, began folding up the shirt in a bustle, her thin face quite fiery with anger. Mrs. Todhetley shook her head; she did not approve of nonsensical notions for these poor peasant girls any more than did the rest of us.

"I'll bring up the right shirt this evening when school's over; and if it suits we'll get on with the rest," concluded Miss Timmens, making her exit with the parcel.

"What the world will come to later, Mr. Johnny, if these wild ideas get much ground, puzzles me to think of," resumed Miss Timmens, as I went with her, talking, along the garden-path. "We shall have no servants, sir; none. It does not stand to reason that a girl will work for her bread at menial offices when she has had fine notions instilled into her. Grammar, and

geography, and history, and botany, and music, and singing, and fancy-work!—what on earth good will they be of to her in making beds and cleaning saucepans? The upshot will be that they won't make beds and they won't clean saucepans; they'll be above it. The Lord protect 'em!—for I don't see what else will; or what will become of them. Or of the world, either, when it can get no servants. My goodness, Master Johnny! what's that? Surely it's the lost earring?"

Close to the roots of a small fir-tree it lay: the earring that had caused so much vexation and hunting. I picked it up: its pink topaz and its diamonds shone brightly as ever in the sun, and were quite uninjured. Mrs. Todhetley remembered then, though it had slipped her memory before, that in coming indoors after our interview with the woman at the gate, she had stopped to shake this fir-tree, bowed down almost to breaking with its weight of snow. The earring must have fallen from her ear then into the snow, and been hidden by it.

Without giving himself time for a mouthful of lunch, the Squire tore away to the station through the mud, as fast as his legs would carry him, and thence to Worcester by train. What an unfortunate mistake it would be should that professional gentleman have been accused, who had bought something from the travelling *pedlar*!

"Well, Cripp, here's a fine discovery!" panted the Squire, as he went bursting into the police-station and to the presence of Sergeant Cripp. "The lost earring has turned up."

"I'm sure I am very glad to hear it," said the sergeant, facing round from a letter he was writing. "How has it been found?"

And the Squire told him how.

"It was not stolen at all, then!"

"Not at all, Cripp. And the poor creature we suspected of taking it proves to be a very respectable old body indeed, nothing of the tramp about her. You—you have not gone any lengths yet with that professional gentleman, I hope!" added the Squire, dropping his voice to a confidential tone.

Cripp paused for a minute as if not understanding.

"We have not employed any professional man at all in the matter," said he; "have not thought of doing so."

"I don't mean that, Cripp. *You* know. The gentleman you suspected of having bought the earring."

Cripp stared. "I have not suspected anyone."

"Goodness me! you need not be so cautious, Cripp," returned the Squire, somewhat nettled. "Eccles made a confidant of me. He told me all about it—except the name."

"What Eccles?" asked Cripp. "I really do not know what you are talking of, sir."

"What Eccles—why your Eccles. Him you sent over to me on Sunday afternoon: a well-dressed, gentlemanly man with a black moustache. Detective Eccles."

"I do not know any Detective Eccles."

"Dear me, my good man, you must be losing your memory!" retorted the Squire in wrath. "He came straight to me from you on Sunday; you sent him off in haste without his dinner."

"Quite a mistake, sir," said the sergeant. "It was not I who sent him."

"Why, bless my heart and mind, Cripp, you'll be for telling me next the sun never shone! Where's your recollection gone?"

"I hope my recollection is where it always has been, Squire. We must be at cross purposes. I do not know anyone of the name of Eccles, and I have not sent anybody to you. As a proof that I could not have done it, I may tell you, sir, that I was summoned to Gloucester on business last Friday directly after I saw you, and did not get back here until this morning."

The Squire rubbed his face, while he revolved probabilities, and thought Cripp must be dreaming.

"He came direct from you—from yourself, Cripp; and he disclosed to me your reasons for hoping you had found the earring, and your

doubts of the honesty of the man who had bought it——the lawyer, you remember. And he brought back the other earring to you that you might compare them."

"Eh—what?" cried Cripp, briskly. "Brought away the other earring, do you say, sir?"

"To be sure he did. What else did you send him for?"

"And he has not returned it to you?"

"Returned it! of course not. You hold it, don't you?"

"Then, Squire Todhetley, you have been cleverly robbed of this second earring," cried Cripp, quietly. "*Dodged* out of it, sir. The man who went over to you must have been a member of the swell-mob. Well-dressed, and a black moustache!".

"He was a college man; he had been at Oxford," debated the unfortunate Pater, sitting on a chair, in awful doubt. "He told me so."

"You did not see him there, sir," said the sergeant, with a suppressed laugh. "I might tell you I had a duke for a grandmother; but it would be none nearer the fact."

"Mercy upon us all!" groaned the Squire. "What a mortification it will be if that other earring's gone! Don't you think somebody in your station here may have sent him, if you were out yourself?"

"I will inquire for your satisfaction, Squire

Todhetley," said the sergeant, opening the door; "but I can answer for it beforehand that it will be useless."

It was as Cripp thought. Eccles was not known at the station, and nobody had been sent to us.

"It all comes of that advertisement you put in, Squire," finished up Cripp, by way of consolation. "The swell-mob would not have known there was a valuable jewel missing but for that, or the address of those who had missed it."

The Pater came home more crestfallen than a whipped schoolboy, after leaving stringent orders with Cripp and his men to track out the swindler. It was a blow to all of us.

"I said he looked as much like a detective as I'm like a Dutchman," quoth Tod.

"Well, it's frightfully mortifying," said the Squire.

"And the way he polished off that beef, and drank down the ale! I wonder he did not contrive to walk off with the silver tankard!"

"Be quiet, Joe! You are laughing, sir! Do you think it is a laughing matter?"

"Well, I don't know," said bold Tod. "It was cleverly done."

Up rose the Pater in a passion. Vowing vengeance against the swindlers who went about the world, got up in good clothes and *a moustache*; and heartily promising the

absent and unconscious Cripp to be down upon him if he did not speedily run the man to earth.

And that's how Mrs. Todhetley lost the other earring.

END OF VOL. I.

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